ELDER EPHRAIM

THE ART OF SALVATION

THE HOLY MONASTERY OF SAINT NEKTARIOS
ROSCOE • NEW YORK

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Prologue

by His Eminence Hierotheos Metropolitan of Nafpaktos and St. Vlasios

I consider it a special and exceptional honor to author the prologue of *The Art of Salvation*, the first volume of homilies by Elder Ephraim (the former Abbot of the Holy Monastery of Philotheou, Mount Athos), as he and the fathers of the Holy

Monastery requested. This feeling of honor stems from the fact that Elder Ephraim is a practiced teacher of the watchful way of life of our Orthodox Church.

I first met Elder Ephraim on Mount Athos when he was living at New Skete. I still

preserve quite vividly within my heart the image of this fervent ascetic, who is endowed with the ceaseless memory of God and spiritual insight. I am speaking of an ascetic who has lived the spiritual life in practice and who has acquired first-hand knowledge of

the passions and how they can be overcome, as well as what constitutes communion with God and how one can attain it. He is a proficient spiritual father with discernment, who (just like every true monastic hesychast) expresses his distinct

ecclesiastical mindset, and simultaneously respects the Bishop whom he asks with extreme humility and his invulnerable grandeur to write the prologue of his first volume of homilies.

Here we witness the association between two gifts that are found within

the Church: the life of the monk and the ministry of the Bishop. This further reminds me of the relationship, as well as the humility, that existed between Saint Nicodemos the Hagiorite and Bishop Hierotheos of Evripos, which is evident in their correspondence in the

beginning of the book *A Handbook of Spiritual Counsel*.

The text contained within this book *The Art of Salvation* are homilies to the monks of the Holy Monastery of Philotheou on Mount Athos, as well as to laypeople, primarily of the United States, who

are his spiritual children and whom he guides in the spiritual life.

The characteristic feature of these homilies is their combination of theology with pastoral care. Indeed, when I speak of theology, I am not referring to academic knowledge, which of

course is necessary in certain instances in the Church's historical life, but rather the theology that is a gift, which manifests itself as the experience of God as well as knowledge of the uncreated words and ideas that are perpetually transmitted as a teaching

via created words and meanings. Elder Ephraim himself was obedient to a sanctified elder: Elder Joseph the Hesychast. He lived with the noetic prayer, as he was instructed by this ascetical elder and hesychast. He experienced the “first

grace," in following the "second grace" (as Elder Joseph very wisely named it), and later he acquired the ability to discern the spirits, which is the true gift of theology.

This theology then becomes a pastoral science that is used to shepherd and guide

spiritual children. Such a theologian knows from his own experience the state of Adam prior to his disobedience and fall (for previously he had subsisted in the state of enlightenment of the nous), and the horrible consequences of the fall (since "the image" of God

was obscured, the nous was darkened, and all the powers of the soul were deformed and acquired their unnatural inclinations, resulting in the creation of the passions as we recognize them today). Consequently, such a theologian is familiar

with the ascetic, watchful, and hesychastic methodology (i.e., obedience, watchfulness, prayer, and noetic hesychasm), through which man is liberated from the rule of the devil, death, and sin, and develops communion with God “in the person

of Jesus Christ." As a matter of fact, he even reaches the vision of God's glory in the human flesh of the Logos, which is Paradise.

Therefore, the close union between theology and pastoral care, between spiritual knowledge and the

ministry of shepherding human souls is clearly evident. Only they who have empirical knowledge of God's mysteries can help others to be liberated from the subjugation of the passions, the devil, and death, something which constitutes the genuine pastoral care of

the Church. If someone is lacking these prerequisites, then he will speak gracefully instead of theologically; aesthetically instead of ascetically.

Elder Ephraim's homilies take place within these boundaries. Unequivocally, his lecture

material is derived from the Holy Scriptures, which are the words of the prophets and Apostles, the immediate witnesses of the bodiless and incarnate Word; from the writings of the holy Fathers of the Church, who are the successors of the Holy Apostles and the

bearers of the apocalyptic experience of Pentecost; from *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* and the Church's *Synaxarion*, in which the lives of the true and sanctified members of the Church are visible, who simultaneously are members not of the mystical but of the real

Body of Christ; and from narratives taken from and referring to sanctified ascetics of Mount Athos. Above all, however, these spiritual words are shaped by the personal experiences of Elder Ephraim, and this is why they are offered authentically, with

simplicity, serenity, and meekness, which are the fruits of Orthodox hesychasm.

I read the homilies contained within this first volume with attention and prayer, most of them within the quietude of the Dormition of the Theotokos

Ampelakiotissa Sacred Monastery, which is located within our Holy Metropolis. As I read these writings, I was spiritually edified, and a state of prayer was created within me. Most importantly, I saw who man was before the fall, where he ended up after

the fall, and how he can be liberated from the dominion of death. These homilies are indeed alive, informative, inspiring, and lead to repentance—the markers of a genuine Orthodox teaching. These homilies, just as with the spoken words of men who possess the Holy Spirit

and have attained communion with Christ through sacred hesychasm, give the impression that the mind of the speaker is moving beyond human boundaries, and they direct the reader to a different understanding of matters that lie beyond

the action of the passions and death, in the full sense of the spiritual significance of this word and state.

When I finished reading these homilies, the following verse of Apostle Paul came to mind: “Let no man beguile you of your

reward in a voluntary humility and worshiping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit

together, increaseth with the increase of God" (Col. 2:18-19).

The Apostle Paul is making reference here to a situation that existed during his time, which related to the faith of the angels, and to visions that originated from fallen, secular man. Even today

we can assert that many faiths of angels (i.e., demons) exist, which are based upon the conceited secular mind, imaginary fantasies, demonic visions and social customs, and not upon the authentic teaching that emanates from union with Christ, the Head of the

Church. The words of the Apostle Paul, therefore, are appropriate: "Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances" (Col. 2:20).

Since we live in a

secularized society that oftentimes influences the ecclesiastic state of affairs, we must humbly struggle with all the Orthodox ecclesiastic prerequisites as described by the teachings of the saints, who are the true members of Christ's Body. We must be closely

united with the Head of the Church Who is Christ, and, as members of Christ's Body, we must be nourished and held together by the Head, and increase spiritually—that is, our entire being must "increaseth with the increase of God" (Col. 2:19). Our purpose in life

must be to increase in God and to advance from our present fallen state to Paradise, from our attachment with the devil to deification, which is exactly the "increase of God."

This spiritual increase is facilitated by Elder Ephraim's homilies,

which remind me not only of an authentic monastic teaching but also the spirit of Mount Athos as I encountered it during the ’60s and ’70s, and as I witness it today in sanctified Athonite monks who lead an ascetical and hesychastic life.

I feel the need to thank the venerable Elder Ephraim for the labors he undertook to acquire this knowledge of God, and I ask him to pray for me too, as well as for all of us who are involved with the pastoral ministry of the people, so that we do not lose the deeper and

more fundamental purpose of pastoral ministry, which is to lead people—primarily ourselves—from "the image" to "the likeness" of God, from the darkness of the mind to enlightenment and deification. We must understand well that

Christianity's purpose is not simply to carry out certain social work, but according to the accurate statement of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, "Christianity is the emulation of the Divine nature."

Introduction

The book you are holding in your hands contains thirty-three homilies given by the venerable Elder Ephraim, the former Abbot of

Philotheou Monastery, who presently resides at St. Anthony's Monastery in Florence, Arizona. These homilies, which have been selected from the hundreds of recorded talks that the Elder has given throughout the past five decades from his position as the spiritual

guide for both the monks of his monasteries as well as laypeople, were originally transcribed and published in Greek by the Holy Monastery of Philotheou in a book entitled *The Art of Salvation [Ἡ Τέχνη τῆς Σωτηρίας]*.

The central theme of

these talks is repentance. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Mt. 3:2), proclaimed St. John the Forerunner. "Repent, and believe the gospel" (Mk. 1:15), announced the Lord Jesus Christ a short time later. The holy disciples similarly "went out and

preached that men should repent" (Mk. 6:12). After His Resurrection, the Lord reaffirmed "that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations" (Lk. 24:47). Following the example of all the Spirit-moved fathers of the

Church throughout the centuries, Elder Ephraim in our days continues inspiring us to repent while simultaneously setting forth for us how to "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (Mt. 3:8).

Thus, this book has rightfully been titled *The Art of Salvation*, for it

demonstrates how to cultivate the fruits of repentance and blossoms of salvation. If you are plagued by sinful passions, it will instruct you how to decrease them. If you are confronted by temptations, it will encourage you to deal

with them. If you are overcome by indifference, it will infuse you with heavenly zeal. If you are battled by despair, it will show you how to draw hope. If you are assaulted by pride, it will inform you how to develop humility. In one word, if you desire to be saved, it

will teach you the art that securely leads to salvation.

In this present English translation, we have ordered the chapter sequence differently than that of the Greek edition. The first twenty-three chapters are homilies given to laypeople; the

last ten chapters, homilies given to monks. In this manner, one can more clearly notice both the overlapping concepts in the two groups of homilies—since both monastics and laypeople belong to the one flock of Christ—as well as the discernment of the Elder

who, aware of each group's distinct needs, tailors his approach and tone accordingly.

Most of the homilies were given in an informal manner without previous preparation by the Elder. Consequently, we have translated the spoken word as demanded by the

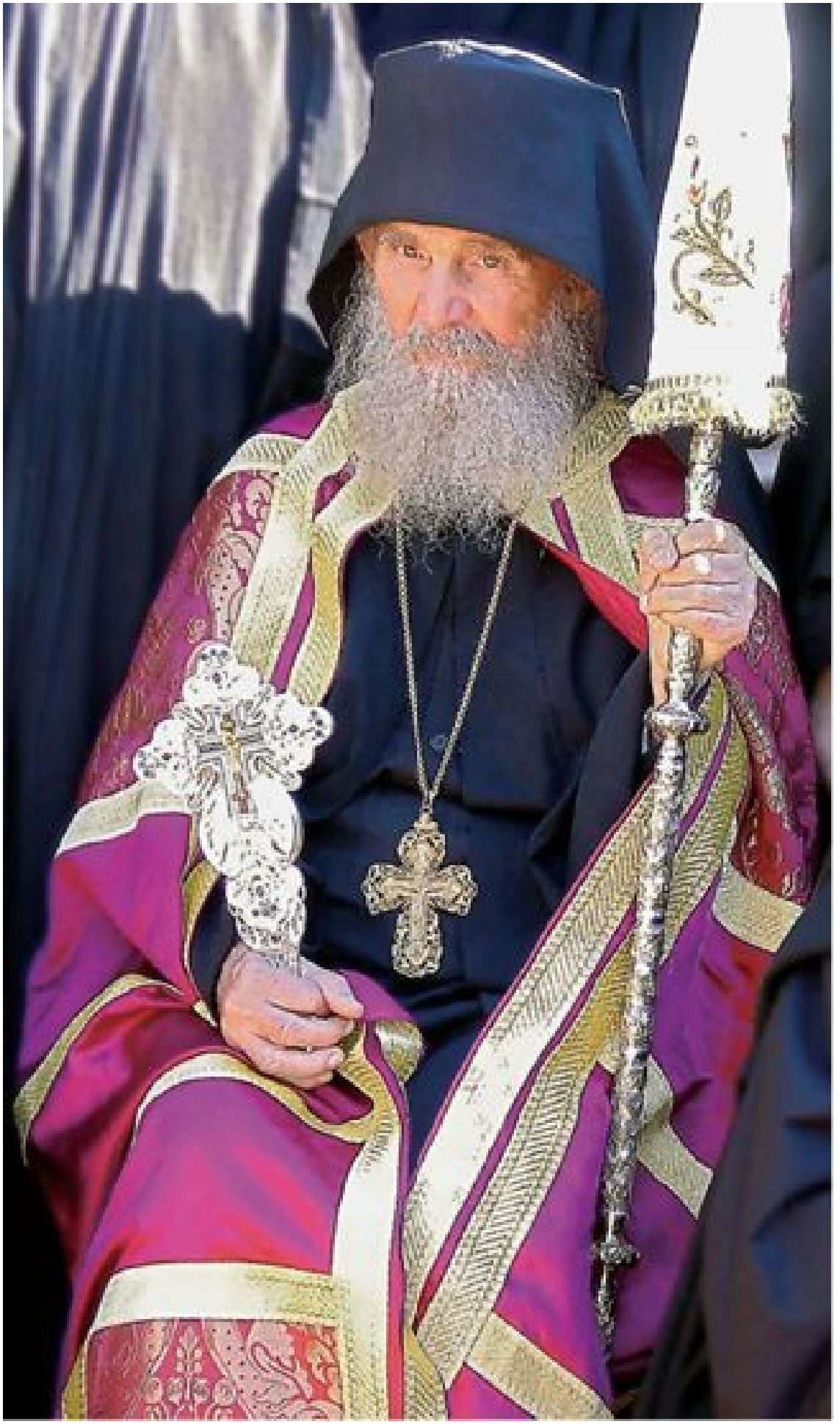
English language in order to convey the spirit of the meanings, not to transliterate word for word.

Wherefore, dear reader, as you make your way through this book, as you learn and become proficient in the “art” that leads to salvation,

remember to pray for everyone who contributed to this publication, and to share what you have found to be beneficial with others who may be unfamiliar with these vital matters. Above all, do not forget to raise the eyes of your soul to Heaven and render

heartfelt thanks to the God and “Captain of our salvation” (Heb. 2:10), Jesus Christ. To Him is due all worship, honor, and glory unto the ages. Amen.

The fathers of St. Nektarios Monastery



Elder Ephraim of Arizona

Homily 1

I See Your Bridal Chamber

I see Your Bridal Chamber adorned, O my

Savior, and I have no wedding garment that I may enter therein. O Giver of Light, make radiant the garment of my soul, and save me,"[1] chants our Church during Holy Week.

The Christian soul, the repentant soul, the soul who is conscious of

her sinfulness and accountability, turns her eyes toward the Bridegroom of the Church and woefully exclaims, “My Savior and my Benefactor: You were crucified for me the sinful soul. I do not possess a clean, radiant garment cleansed with tears and

repentance. I do not have a pure garment. How will I appear before You, O Heavenly Bridegroom of every repentant and pure soul? Your bridal chamber is beautifully adorned and wonderfully embellished. I, however, do not have the necessary garment in order to dwell

therein eternally. Please, I beg of You, O Heavenly Bridegroom of my soul: Make me radiant, and cleanse the garment of my soul. Give me the required means of purification in order for this garment to become radiant, and make me worthy of partaking and

dwelling in Your heavenly and eternal bridal chamber.”

The Kingdom of God, the Jerusalem above, the heavenly, eternal, and incorrupt world constitutes the bridal chamber, where God dwells in light, and where angels chant unceasingly,

“Holy, Holy, Holy is our God” (cf. Isa. 6:3). In that heavenly world exist the bliss of God, happiness, magnificence, and beauty.

Souls who have been cleansed and purified with tears sense this heavenly bridal chamber. They taste it now at the present time. They see it

with the eyes of their soul. They desire it, long for it, and yearn for the day and the hour when they will go to dwell in it.

We wretched people, however, are not assured of the above by our conscience because neither our soul nor our body is clean.

Consequently, the eyes of our soul are not open to see this heavenly world and beauty. The Apostle Paul had a glimpse of it and exclaimed full of surprise and amazement, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His

judgments and how inscrutable His ways!" (Rom. 11:33). Elsewhere he says, "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him" (1 Cor. 2:9).

We are invited to

become inhabitants of and to dwell in this heavenly bridal chamber, to assemble with the angels and the saints in a heavenly bridal room, in the Jerusalem above, in the beauty of the Heavenly Kingdom, in the unapproachable light, in the super-brilliant

darkness of the unknowing of God,[2] once we have purified the garment of our soul.

Our Church helps us tremendously with the purification of our soul's garment, which we are called to achieve. For this reason, during these holy

days, during this time of the year that has opened up for us again—through general fasting, by abstaining not only from food, but mainly from evil desires—every Christian who longs for salvation must collect his thoughts and decisively struggle to live more

modestly, moderately, and plainly. He must cease trying to look attractive externally and turn toward his internal embellishment. The external vessel will be destroyed; it will disintegrate; it will decay and become food for the worms. However, nothing

can ruin the beauty of the soul; on the contrary, the Spirit of God remodels it to a more noble state.

Time is continually passing; it is decreasing more and more. Every day that passes is another step toward death. We should know that even one tear of repentance is

equivalent to a spiritual bath. Just as the body feels refreshed when it bathes, and just as clothes become clean when they are washed, similarly, the tears of a repentant soul purify the heart, purify the mind, purify the body, purify life, purify speech, and purify a person's

every action.

Let us kneel and pray with extreme humility! Every repentant soul is given words: it is granted enlightened prayer. We observe this with the harlot in the Gospel reading of Holy Wednesday (cf. Mt. 26:6:16). How did this

woman of the street know how to pray? She was given the spirit of prayer the very moment she decided to repent and started to proceed toward the light and truth. How beautiful are her words to the Savior! She knelt in front of Him and, undoubtedly, had an inner

dialogue with Him! She expressed her repentance with all her heart because it had been revealed to her that Christ was her only Savior. Everyone else had deceived her. She realized that only Jesus Christ was the One who would give her light, relief, joy, and the

remission of her many offenses.

"Accept me," she said, "the sinner. Accept the sea of my sins!" As you know, her tears that washed the immaculate feet of Christ were so plentiful and copious that she was compelled to wipe them away with her

luxuriant hair. There was no need for any other myrrh. Her tears were a most-precious myrrh worth a large fortune. They were capable of erasing her entire debt before God. Even though she was deep in mire, submerged in filth, and enveloped in stench, those

precious tears were accepted by our Savior, and they brightened the garment of her soul. I wonder, when will we brighten the garment of our soul?

Every sinful soul who sheds tears and wets the feet of our Christ noetically [3] also receives

the same blessing as the harlot. Not only was she herself saved, but she also became a bright example for every straying soul by pointing to the way, the path, and the light of return. If one could penetrate into the soul of this woman—the very moment she was

bewailing, crying, and wetting the immaculate feet of Jesus—one would witness how light she became as the tremendous weight was lifted from her, and how much peace her conscience received. On account of her repentant tears, Christ granted complete

remission of all her sins.

This is the case for every person who returns to Him. Christ bestows bountiful forgiveness, as long as a person repents sincerely. There is no problem, whatsoever, once a person repents. “I do not desire the death of the lawless man, since

My will is for him to turn from the evil way and live" (cf. Ez. 18:23), says the Lord. God makes an oath with Himself and confirms, "I do not want any person, any soul, to be lost and condemned to Hell, but I will wait patiently for him. I will exhaust every margin of

time waiting for his return.”

Let us follow the bright road of repentance! If we sincerely repent, God will accept our repentance and establish a new relationship with us. Many times due to the weight of sin, a person reaches the point of

asking, “Can God possibly forgive me for what I have done?” To some extent, man has a point. He feels heavily burdened and wonders if God can lift so much weight. For goodness’ sake! Do you think that Christ our God, the ocean of compassion and mercy,

is incapable of lifting the weight of one sinful soul? What is a handful of sand when thrown in the ocean? It is nothing; it disappears. Does even a single grain remain visible on the surface of the water? Not at all. This is precisely what happens with all the sins of

humanity. They are a zero in comparison to the abyss of God's compassion. This is even more true with the sins of only one soul!

The enemy of man's salvation, however, the devil, comes from the right [4] and advises the

soul, “There’s no way that you will be forgiven!” He pressures and oppresses the soul in order to drive it to the crime of suicide. We should never believe such a thing, even if we commit crimes every day. We should never lose hope. No matter what we do, no matter how far we

fall, no matter how often we are injured and hurt—we should never ever despair or lose hope!

Oftentimes thoughts of doubt persist: "How long will God wait for me?" Rest assured that as long as God is allowing you to live, it is a guarantee from Him that

He is waiting for you! You cannot deny God the prerogative to wait for your repentance. With this hope and courage in mind, let us approach the majestic throne of God's grace.

We have innumerable brilliant examples of people who repented, who

were previously living far away from God, but who later returned and were not simply saved but even reached great heights of holiness.

Consider the example of Saint Mary of Egypt. Think of how many sinful men and women there have been like the

venerable Mary, who later became saints! For this reason, no one should despair. Rather, one should proceed with repentance to the spiritual father, who is able with his words to reconcile the sinner with God and to justify him instantly. “Whatever you loose on

earth will be loosed in heaven" (Mt. 16:19), proclaimed our Christ to His Apostles. "The Grace of the Most-Holy Spirit has you forgiven and loosened in the present age and in the future." [5] Automatically, God's "computer" deletes all of man's sins and,

simultaneously, the gate of the Heavenly Kingdom opens. The bridal chamber of Christ now receives the person who previously was without a radiant garment for his soul.

On account of God's infinite compassion, let us thank Him, and let us

worship Him gratefully with all our soul. If God were not so infinitely compassionate, no one would be saved. No one at all! There is no one, nor has there ever been, nor will there ever be anyone on the earth who is blameless, without fault, and without stain. No one

can boast that he has preserved his heart clean and unblemished. Nonetheless, God's compassion is so effective, this medication is so powerful and potent that it wipes out everything. It makes wondrous interventions, performs unbelievable

operations, and saves man's soul from certain death.

There are instances where souls who left this life unrepentant—through God's divine providence and the intercessions of holy people—came back to life and received forgiveness. "After death

there is no repentance" (vid. Ps. 6:5) for the condemned soul itself. For the soul to repent on its own, it must return to this life. Yet, God's providence performed even such miracles in order to save people.

The bridal chamber has been opened. Christ is

patiently waiting for us; we must not delay. We have now entered the arena of fasting and purification, and the bath of repentance is awaiting us. Let us use our time wisely now that all things are conducive to repentance. The words of our Church are replete

with contrition, as long as we carefully pay attention to their meaning. Let us kneel every day and night, and let us beseech God to grant us a contrite spirit and tears.

And if God grants tears to our eyes, let us thank Him, let us humble ourselves, and let us

confess to Him our weaknesses. Let us admit that we are incapable and unworthy of repentance, and that only with His compassion do we sincerely repent. If we believe in God and if we acknowledge our sinfulness, we do so only through His grace and

compassion. If grace does not overshadow man, he does not change. If we decide to return, if we repent, if we change our lives, this is all due to the indescribable grace of God. If the grace of God has come upon us, this means that grace will accept us.

Let us repent as long as we have time at our disposal, as long as we have time in front of us. God is so good! Our Heavenly Father's heart is big enough to embrace all of us, as long as we draw near with repentance and confession. Especially now during Great Lent,

we should attend the Liturgies of the Presanctified Gifts because they are filled with contrition and grace. How beautiful is the Cherubic Hymn of the Presanctified Liturgy! [6] Likewise, what doctrine and theology does the

Cherubic Hymn of Holy Saturday contain! [7]

Let us compel ourselves to remain vigilant and watchful, and let us ward off negligence and indolence because they hinder God's love toward man.[8] Oftentimes the demon

comes to make us feel tired and worn out. “Don’t do prostrations,” he whispers to us. “Don’t get up to pray now. You are tired! Sleep a little longer because you have to go to work …” and so many other things. Let us not listen to him! Let us force ourselves because

we do not know what may happen in the moments that follow. “As I find you, I will judge you” (cf. Ez. 33:12–16). If He finds us forcing ourselves to struggle, He will rank us with the faithful strugglers. If, however, He finds us in negligence and indolence, He will

group us with the failures and the indolent.

Furthermore, we should help our fellow men. Let us talk to others about God, and the love of the Heavenly Father. Let us give courage and hope to others. Helping another soul is the greatest form of charity.

Just as others have helped us, we also are obligated to do the same and help others.

Let us, therefore, force ourselves to struggle in everything, so that we may enter the bridal chamber of Christ —because "to them who struggle belongs the

Kingdom of Heaven" (cf. Mt. 11:12). Amen.

Homily 2

The Sanctification of the Soul

Wretched soul: know thyself. Realize how nobly you were created by God! Understand that you are eternal, that you will never die, that you have the privilege of immortality. You are not like the body, which will die some day. It will

perish and become food for the worms; it will decay and rot. Of course, it will be resurrected during the Second Coming of Christ; however, if the body has not received the grace of God during this life, its resurrection will be unto perdition.

My soul, you are something heavenly, something exquisite, and something noble. You have been created in a special way by God. You will leave this world, and you will return to Him, as Christ revealed: “I came forth from the Father and have come into the world.

Again I leave the world and go to the Father" (Jn. 16:28). Your homeland is not down here. Your homeland, O soul, is in Heaven because you are imperishable. Everything up there is unchanging; it does not lose its magnificence, beauty, splendor, fragrance, and

divine grace.

In that homeland there reside angels, saints, all that is heavenly, and the finest that God has to offer. He has arranged everything there very nicely, just as everything here has its beauty. The sun, the moon, the stars, the seasons, the land and

sea animals, the birds, man, and so many other things all possess a distinct beauty and have been arrayed so wisely by God. Collectively, they are ordered in superb harmony and constitute a source of appreciable pleasure and delight for man as he admires them.

When a person travels into the country—especially in the spring—and sees the lush green forests, the colorful flowers, the astoundingly beautiful works of God, he can clearly envision how beautiful the imperishable, eternal, endless, and unchanging

things found in the Heavenly Kingdom will be. Man will become a citizen of and inherit this homeland above, the Kingdom on high—both with his soul and body, and with the nobility with which he is endowed—only when he has sorted things out with God down

here, while still on the earth. Then he will have every right to acquire eternal life.

"Lay hold on eternal life" (1 Tim. 6:12), the Apostle Paul exhorted Timothy. That is, take a good hold of eternal life so that you do not lose it.

How does someone

hold on to eternal life? When one constantly meditates on it! By contemplating heavenly life in our mind and heart, the desire for it is born, which in turn helps us lead a careful life here on earth, in order to acquire it. When someone watches his health, he

takes every precaution possible to ensure it is not compromised. When someone desires to acquire something, one struggles and makes every possible effort to attain it. Similarly, when we think of the other life and wholeheartedly believe in its existence,

we will undoubtedly desire to struggle in order to acquire it.

A certain hymn says, “Be careful not to be pulled down by earthly and perishable things, lest you become attached to them and lose the eternal things.” The body, which is inferior,[9] should not

prevail over the soul, which is nobler and superior. On the contrary, the soul should govern and win over the body. How does the soul win over the body? When man struggles to purify his inner being, he wins over the body, for through the soul's effort, man's body

is also purified and cleansed.

If the heart of man is pure, he will speak modestly, and his movements, his gestures, and all his bodily senses will function according to the degree of cleanliness and purity of his heart. However, if the heart is

impure, all the sensory organs will generate sinful material—something that will ultimately hinder man's salvation. This is why Christ directs us, "See to it, O man, to clean the inside of your cup because when you clean it, the outside will also

become clean. If you leave the inside unclean, the outside will also be dirty" (cf. Mt. 23:26). Thus, when the body is purified, together with the soul it will achieve the incorruptible resurrection at the Second Coming.

When the voice of the Son and Word of God

gives the signal for the Resurrection, and when the angels' trumpets sound, the dead will arise from the four corners of the earth. The land and the sea will give back the dead (vid. Rev. 20:13), and the souls will reunite with their bodies—not in a perishable and material

form, but henceforth in an incorrupt state, just as the body of Christ after His Resurrection.

The Resurrection of Christ heralds and confirms that all people will be resurrected during the Second Coming; however, not as they were buried down here in the

grave, but "in incorruption and in spirituality" (cf. 1 Cor. 15:42). The clouds will gather the people who will be saved and will lift them to meet the descending Judge of the living and the dead. "Then we who are alive and remain shall be

caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall be with the Lord forever" (1 Thess. 4:17).

In our prayer we should ask God to give us the proper enlightenment, self-knowledge, and awareness of our "divine

nobility," as it is written in the Psalms (vid. Ps. 49:13). We should constantly ponder, "So I am a heavenly being? Do I have such an exalted relationship with God?"

Of course! We were created in God's "image and likeness" (vid. Gen. 1:26). According to His

“image,” on account of our noetic [10] capacity, and “in His likeness” because we are able to “resemble God”—as much as is humanly possible—through virtue. God possesses the virtues by nature, whereas we acquire them with His

help and grace when we struggle. We have them through God's blessing because we have been created at a certain point "in time," whereas God is timeless. Therefore, we should make good use of our "divine nobility" and divine origin, and try to fill our soul (which has

been exceptionally graced and blessed by God) with as many virtues as possible. We should nourish it, water it, clothe it, and embellish it, so that our soul becomes beautiful in the eyes of God.

Prayer, hymnology, attending church, making

prostrations, primarily going to Holy Confession and receiving Holy Communion, helping others in any way possible (especially through acts of love that stem from our heart and not from pride and egotism), are all good steps toward beautifying

our soul.

But above all, we should maintain a humble mindset. We must believe that everything we accomplish is due to God's help. "What do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had

not received it?" (1 Cor. 4:7). Whatever we have, we have received it all from God. You assisted someone with your own hands? Very well. Didn't God give you your hands? Did you say a good word with your mouth? Did you save someone with your good advice? Do not

boast! God gave you both your mouth and the ability to speak. Did you use your feet to run and serve others? Well, they also belong to God. Did you praise God with your heart, with your inner voice,[11] and with your inherent logic? Did you have good thoughts about

God and your neighbor? Again, the heart and mind are also God's. Did you even desire to be born? No! It was God Who brought you into existence. Since everything is a gift from God and all things must serve Him, then what can you possibly offer to

God?

This is why Christ said to His disciples, "When you have done all that you were ordered to do, you must know that you are simple and worthless slaves" (cf. Lk. 17:10). "I give to you, and then you give to others. If I had not given to you,

you would have nothing to give. You did not conceal the gift, but you transmitted it and multiplied it." Hence, what is rewarded is the desire to perform virtue, as in the parable of the talents (vid. Mt. 25:15-28).

To one person He

gave one talent, to the other He gave two, and to another He gave five. He then demanded a twofold return from all three: the first person had to make them two, the second four, and the third ten. The last two servants, of course, doubled the talents, while the first one

hid it. “My master is strict,” he said, “so I’d better hide it; and when he comes I will give it back to him.” He was condemned as lazy and indolent because he buried his talent, whereas the others increased their talents and received God’s blessing.

We should do the same. We should multiply every talent God has given us.

Has he given us the ability to speak? We should say a few consoling words.

Has he given us physical strength? We should serve someone

who is weak.

To someone else He has given the gift to visit the sick, in order to help and serve in this manner.

Another person He called to work within marriage, in order to help her husband or his wife and the children.

Another He called to

be a monk and to serve Him with ascesis.[12]

Another He blessed with economic prosperity in order to help others financially. One must use the wealth for life's necessities alone and not be engrossed by it. Man must use the blessings

that God has given him to take care not only of himself but also other people in need.

To each person He has given a certain gift and calling, through which man is invited to serve God, in order to express his gratitude through his actions. For his

gratefulness toward God, man is saved by His goodness. God accepts man's gratitude as service to Him, and He responds by granting His own gifts —primarily the gift of His Kingdom and the Homeland above.

It is necessary for us to receive enlightenment.

We should not be deluded by the world. We should not be drawn and attached to earthly things. We should not be weighed down by matters of the present age and this current life. Rather, we should be affixed to the things above, to the Kingdom of God.

Down here on earth, as man advances through the many years of life, he changes due to illness and aging. He is born as a small infant. He then develops into a child, and later an adolescent. He grows old, and finally he returns to God. These progressive stages in age

alter man, until he finally matures fully like a well-ripened fruit.

As he changes physically, his soul is also changing. If he draws near to God, he receives the things that come from God. We touch an object, for example, and feel if it is warm or cold. We

touch a piece of clothing and say it is soft. When we touch wooden furniture we say it is hard. As soon as we touch something, we sense its specific properties. The same takes place with the soul. When we approach God correctly, we feel and taste His energies.

For instance, when we pray, we feel the love of God, the joy of God, the peace of God, the wisdom of God, the compassion of God. Thus, we also become compassionate and loving; we also are enlightened and purified. Just as God is pure, man also becomes pure

because he receives the power from God to purify himself. Thus, slowly but surely, his soul is embellished in the eyes of God.

Conversely, when a person falls into sin and wallows in the mire of iniquity, his soul becomes disfigured and filthy, it

begins to emit a foul odor, and the angels distance themselves, unable to tolerate the soul's stench.

Saint Andrew the Fool for Christ was holy and free of passions, yet he pretended to be a lunatic and would roam around to different places. His

biography states that he once entered a residence of sinful women, where he sensed a tremendously offensive odor. He immediately felt distressed, for he was pure and thus could not bear the stench. In following, the saint revealed to these ladies

that they emitted a terribly foul odor on account of the sins of their soul and body. The angels—and especially our guardian angels—distance themselves and flee from man when he is not careful!

However, when man prays, he receives

fragrance and grace from God, and his guardian angel also prays by his side and petitions, “My God, hear this person’s prayer. Give him what he is asking.” When prayer is further accompanied by tears and offered with true repentance, the guardian angel rejoices

because he is accompanying and watching over such a beautiful soul, and he has boldness before God.

Conversely, when he has been assigned to a soul who is utterly filthy and dressed in torn rags, he stays afar while the devil draws near. Pigs

like to rummage through the mud with their face and snout, and they enjoy eating rotten food. We, however, feel disgusted at this sight. This is how a person is seen in the eyes of God—like swine—when he does not live carefully.

The angels have

tremendous love for man's soul because they are our big brothers, and they know what Paradise and Hell are. They celebrate when it is time to accompany a saved soul to the heavens. "Why should this soul, which God appointed me to look after, be condemned?"

they ponder. “Why should the devil take it instead of Christ? Why should the dark one win? Why should the thief take it? Why shouldn’t I win it over, by the grace of God, and carry it on my wings into Heaven? Since it is God’s breath, it should return to its Father!” Thus

our angel tries to help us. He advises us to avoid certain things, and instructs us to be cautious of other things.

However, it is not long before the miserable and filthy desire of sin and the world reappear, enticing us with many appealing things, and

attracting us like a powerful magnet. We also have the other passionate world within us, the old man[13] who has his own desires. These internal desires merge with the external ones and, together, they pressure the soul into submission. And every submission

results in a corresponding sin, which is added to man's criminal record. Later, when the time comes for man to die physically, he takes this record with him and proceeds with it through the toll-houses.[14]

If, however, a person

has confessed down here on earth beforehand, God (through the spiritual guide) will have erased the sins from his file. When such a person encounters the toll-houses, and the demons accuse him, “Look at the sins you committed here,” the angel will reply,

“Take a look at the next column. They have been erased. Everything has been cleared up on earth. You can say nothing about these sins because they have all been confessed and erased. Tears fell on them and wiped them away. What you have recorded in your

paperwork is no longer valid. God is just and wrongs no one."

For this reason our Church continuously advises us, "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean. Remove your iniquities from your hearts" (Isa. 1:16). Wash and clean yourselves, She

proclaims. Cast evil away from your hearts, draw near to God, and restore your severed relationship with Him because you don't know what tomorrow will bring.

After Saint Anthony the Great fell asleep in the Lord and was ascending toward Heaven,

the demons stopped him and asked, “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I am headed for God,” replied the saint.

“But you have sins,” they objected.

Then the Archangel and his guardian angel stepped forward and asked the demons, “When

were the things you are accusing this soul of done? Before or after he received the angelic schema?”[15]

“Before the schema,” they responded.

“Well,” said the angels, “everything that was done before was erased when he became a

monk and received the angelic schema, this second baptism. Do you have anything to present after he was tonsured?”

They examined their papers, but the saint led such a clean and pure life that they had nothing on him. Consequently, Saint Anthony’s soul continued

its ascent freely—albeit, the demons had delayed him for an hour.

Abba Paul, "the Simple," was a very elderly man. Nevertheless, he was a sanctified soul who decided to become a monk in his old age. One day, when he was still in

the world, he went to work in his field. When he returned home, he found his wife with another man.

He said to them, “You two can stay together and look after each other. I am leaving to become a monk.”

He left immediately

and went to Saint Anthony the Great. He knocked on the door, and Saint Anthony opened.

"What do you want here grandpa?" he asked.

"I came to be a monk."

"You came to be a monk at this age, and you came to me? It's better

for you to go to a monastery where there are young people who can take care of you. I'm an old man; you're an old man … . How are we going to look after each other?"

"I'm not leaving. I will stay here."

"Don't stay here.

Leave, because I will not keep you."

"No, I'm not leaving!"

Saint Anthony went back into his cell and closed the door. He remained inside for the next three days. At some point it was necessary for him to exit his cell. When

he opened the door, he found the venerable Paul still waiting outside.

"Grandpa, you're still here?" he asked.

"Yes I am. I will die here and I will accuse you of being merciless," he responded playfully. "Why don't you take me in and make me a monk?"

“But,” he objected, “you can’t become a monk at this age.”

“Sure I can. Why not?”

“Okay, come inside. You will have to start struggling now! You know, we monks read …”

“I will also read.”

“We chant and pray.”

“I can do that, too.”

Saint Anthony began his ascetical struggles, and simple Paul followed right along.

“Let’s set the table to eat,” said Saint Anthony, as he soaked two bread rusks for Paul and one for himself. “Now we will say the prayer.”

They stood for one whole hour reading various prayers.

Finally, Saint Anthony said, “Sit down grandpa. Eat!”

“Why did you serve two rusks for me and one for yourself?” asked Paul.

“Because I am a monk and you are not yet.”

“Since I will also become a monk, I will eat only one.”

In the end, Saint Anthony kept him. This elderly man struggled even more than the young monks and surpassed them. On account of his great simplicity and holiness, he received

grace from God to cast out high-ranking demons; that is, commanding officers of demons.

One day when a possessed man was brought to Saint Anthony the Great to cast out the demon, he directed them to Abba Paul. The righteous Paul tried to

expel it, but the demon would not leave. He climbed up on a rock and raised his hands in prayer. In those regions the sun burns like a furnace. Dough placed on a rock will be baked into bread, as if it was placed in an oven. That's how hot the sun was; yet he stood on

the boulder for hours.

"In the name of Christ, I'm not coming down from here unless you come out!" As soon as he uttered these words, instead of Abba Paul being burned on the rock, the demon started to burn inside the man.

"I'm coming out

grandpa! Grandpa, I'm leaving! Your humility is burning me," cried out the demon as it fled.

But why didn't it come out from the start when he first told it to leave? Because Paul had initially objected to Saint Anthony's request. "Why don't *you* cast out the

demon, Elder?" he asked. "Why are you asking *me* to do it?" The demon would not come out initially because he talked back in this manner. However, since he was holy, simple, and never became offended, he finally expelled the demon on account of his

great simplicity.

We see how much the good deeds he performed (both as a layman and later as a monk) helped him. He became a chosen vessel. His soul became so beautiful that the demons were paralyzed and fled as soon as they saw him.

We must also strive to embellish our soul with good works. We should be careful not to sin, but instead to remain pure. The Kingdom of Heaven, with the angels and the pure Lord, is the pure dwelling place for pure souls.[16] Hell is the filthy

abode of the demons.

Our Christ especially loves clean souls, and He enters into spiritual matrimony with them: a chaste, pure, and holy matrimony. And Christ places all the souls whom He weds into His Kingdom, where they will enjoy the splendor of the

inheritance on high. All the soul-brides will gather there in white. Each one will be youthful, magnificent, and adorned with the crowns, necklaces, beauty, splendor, and fragrance of her virtues. All the souls will be as fragrant as God, and each one will rejoice

when it sees another soul —because it will not see its own splendor, but the splendor of all the others. This will be a source of sheer delight.

Let us struggle so that we also become worthy of this elect portion in the Kingdom of God! Amen.

St. Mark the Evangelist

Homily 3

Only One Thing Is Needed

My beloved children, From the Holy and

Sacred Gospel we are all familiar with Lazarus, who was resurrected after four days in the tomb. Lazarus had two sisters: Martha and Mary. They once invited the Lord to their home for a meal. Indeed, the Lord went to their home for their hospitality. Martha was

extremely concerned with preparing the food. Her sister Mary, on the other hand, sat by the feet of Jesus and listened to His divine teaching. Martha sought Mary's help by asking the Lord to permit her to arise from His feet and busy herself with the preparations. At that

moment, in order to teach Martha that her concern for worldly matters should be in moderation, our Christ informed her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things, but one thing is needed. Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken

away from her" (Lk. 10:41).

This commandment of Christ applies to all of us. Our concern for life's necessities should be in moderation, as much as is necessary to serve our needs. According to the Christian teaching, what has value is the "one

thing needed”; that is, the concern for how to be pleasing to God, the concern for the salvation of our immortal soul.

Martha attempted to please the Lord with material things. Mary, however, was wiser and more prudent. She realized that it was an

opportunity to hear His divine teaching. “How much longer will the Lord remain with us on the earth?” she thought to herself. Therefore, she sat attentively next to Him, and the Lord promised that this blessing would not be taken away from her; that is, the blessing

of carefully listening to the divine words, and delighting in the vision of Christ and His teachings.

We must concern ourselves with the inevitable necessities of life. We cannot live without caring for material things because we are equally corporeal

and spiritual. The body requires food, clothing, and the like. Above all, however, our immortal soul is in need of salvation, of this "one thing needed." Our ultimate concern, our only worry should be how to purify our soul, how to draw near to God, how to

conform to the will of God, and how to avoid being condemned to Hell. The salvation of our soul is not a game! We cannot play with our eternal life, because we know very well that we are mortal; we are transient; we are foreigners; we are visitors. We are simply

guests on this earth, and one day, each one of us will bid farewell to this temporary dwelling, and we will depart for our own permanent residence. Our own residence is where the soul returns: "whence it came" (cf. Gen. 3:19). "And God breathed in his face the

breath of life, and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7). The soul, this living essence of man, was created by God through His inbreathing and through His energy, and it will return "whence it came."

For this reason, when we lack divine

consolation, we feel a void in our soul. The soul is not content with anything material because all material things are foreign to its nature. When, however, the soul of man draws near to God through prayer and virtuous conduct, it rejoices, it feels secure,

and it senses God within.

The matter of eternal life should not be taken lightly because, if after a few moments we depart from this life, we will find ourselves—definitively and positively—before eternity. Is it a game to confront fearsome death?

To encounter the demons? To face our criminal record—which every man has before God—and to observe all our sins being enumerated in complete detail? To discover our sinfulness, which we are unaware of presently? Is it a game to begin our ascent to the Judge, and to

face the toll-houses? How will we look at the Lord straight in the eyes? Does our conscience reassure us? Does it hearten us and encourage us? Do we have the confidence? No! I am the first one who does not have it!

We will not be able to look at the Lord in the

eyes. We will lower our head in shame because we did not do the will of God. We defiled the white garment that we received during Holy Baptism. I wonder, however: Did we ever wash it with tears? Did we pour out tears of repentance? Did we change our life and live

with purity? Not at all! Just as we are about to accomplish something good, we fall back into the same filthy muck again!

With all the strength of our soul, we must put things in order and think: “What does my salvation require? What is my soul?

My soul is immortal, and I can die in a few moments. What's going to happen then? Then judgment follows. What will God's decision be at the conclusion of the trial? I will either be placed within the light or the darkness; either with God for eternity, or with

the devil for eternity; either in Paradise or in Hell—all in a matter of minutes!”

Now we are alive. If, however, something happens to us and we die suddenly, we will encounter all these truths. There are no exceptions! There is nothing that can

change this fixed course of developments. We will see death, judgment, and everything else unfolding in front of us. Yet, we deal with things so thoughtlessly!

We sin; we remain indifferent; we neglect our prayers and God's commandments; we do

not listen to our conscience and correct our way of life, even though we realize that we can die at any given moment. Then, everything we have created here on earth, whether it be wealth, family, diplomas, or glory and honor, will instantly

disappear. “Death has come, and all things have vanished.”[17]

Man is constantly deceived by the devil. The devil shows him a screen with various movies, and man becomes mesmerized. As he stares with his mouth wide open at the film in front of

him, two worms, one black and one white (i.e., day and night) remove the ground (i.e., time) underneath his feet. And as he is enchanted and captivated with all that the world is presenting, he suddenly collapses like a house of cards and, terrified, he wonders,

“How did I find myself down here? How did the ground disappear?” However, nothing can be rectified at that time.

Such was the case with a certain sinful man who had never even thought about God. When it came time for his life to come to a close, when he

had reached the very end, he became extremely uneasy and on his last breath he called upon the Lord. However, an angel appeared and responded, “When the sun was shining midday high in the sky, where were you? Where were you wandering then? Now that

the sun has set, *now* you remembered God? Where were you for so many years?" The same will happen to each one of us if we do not concern ourselves with God and our soul.

This is why we must attend to our soul, to the "one thing needed." We

should ceaselessly be concerned with how to purify our heart, how to purify our mind, how to purify our body, and how to free our conscience from the invisible bonds of sin. Then, with the grace of God, we will attain the “one thing needed,” and through

death we will indeed cross over to Heaven.

The person who undertakes this holy preoccupation for the salvation of his soul and close union with God will not be seen frequenting nightclubs and dances. You will not see such a person involving himself

with unnecessary things. On the contrary! You will notice that he is always careful, wise, serious, thoughtful, and mindful of every thing that can possibly lead him to sin.

We, however—of whom I am the first—reveal with our actions how frivolously we have

taken into account the "one thing needed," and how little we believe in God, the eternity of the soul, and the Kingdom of Heaven.

We must reflect upon these matters very seriously and think, "I have an immortal soul; I have a conscience. I will

go to be judged by God, and an eternal decision will follow shortly thereafter. What does God want from me? He wants me to correct myself, to repent, to stop sinning, to confess, to cry for my sins, and to map out a new path—a righteous, bright, and positive path."

I should look neither to the right nor to the left, but directly toward Heaven. And when death comes, it will not disturb me. The Bible states, “I prepared myself, and I was not disturbed” (Ps. 118:60). When someone is ready, he does not become alarmed. Who

panics? The person who is unprepared.

I do not know if you have ever seen a person who is about to die: how he yells, how he sees angels, how he sees demons, how he sees the Archangel Michael holding a sword, how he turns his eyes, how he

swallows “the bitter cup!” Everything mentioned in the funeral service and in the teachings of the Fathers is absolutely true. These events will take place for every person, and particularly for every Christian.[18] We have witnessed many deaths,

we have seen many things, and we sign and certify with the blood of our heart that these things are true.

So, let us prepare ourselves before this hour comes, before death arrives, before we see the demons surrounding our deathbed, desiring to

seize our soul and take us to Hell.[19] At that time, our big brothers, the good angels, these holy beings, will show their concern for us and attempt to deliver our soul from the hands of the demons. This is how much our holy brothers and the guardian angels of our souls love

us!

This is why we must constantly ask our guardian angel to help and protect us. When we pray, he prays with us; however, when we sin, he sits and cries. I am going to tell you a very beautiful story from the holy Fathers.

Once, a holy hermit had gone to the city to see the Bishop about some matter of the skete.[20] There he saw a young man standing outside a house crying and lamenting. He realized with his gift of clairvoyance, after the

eyes of his soul had been opened, that the person crying was not a human, but an angel of God. He approached and asked him, “In the name of God, tell me who you are.”

The angel replied, “I am not a human, O servant of God. I am the guardian angel of a soul,

who presently is inside this house fornicating. I am sitting outside because I cannot enter inside where such impurity and filth exist. That is why I am sitting here, crying and begging God to illuminate this soul to repent and to cease persisting in sin."

The angel was crying because this person sold his immortal soul to the devil for "a plate of lentils," according to Scripture (cf. Gen. 25:33).

All of us, and I first, must seriously consider these things and not allow the devil and sin to deceive us. We must

attend to our immortal soul, correct ourselves, and live carefully, because we know very well that the demons, who entice us and push us to sin, simultaneously observe and record our falls with extreme detail (including the time, the people involved, and the

associated particulars). It is not a fairy tale; it is not a game; it is not a lie that we will face fearsome death!

We do not know what tomorrow will bring. We may unexpectedly find ourselves in the courthouse of God, and then we will bang our

heads against the wall in regret; however, forgiveness and correction will no longer be possible. Currently, we have the blessing from God to be alive. We have not yet departed from this life. We still have the right to repent; we have the ability to emend our

criminal record, and to lead a light-filled life. We should thank God now that we are still breathing and capable of voicing a word of repentance with every breath. Let us correct our life today, now that we have time, now that we are able to walk, now that death has

not yet arrived. I should correct myself first, and then all of you can follow me as well. So that, as we each correct ourselves, we may altogether gain eternal life.

We have nothing in our power. We do not control ourselves, or our wives, or our children, or

our wealth, or our health —absolutely nothing! Everything is uncertain. Everything is dangling by a thread because we can lose everything, and then death follows. Do you know where you will go? No! Do you know how to get there? No! Who will guide you to your

destination? Since God alone will guide you, see to it that you work things out with God now; otherwise, someone else will lead you to the depths of Hades where nothing can be corrected.

How many people have been killed on the spot by an automobile as

they were walking down the street? As someone was happily singing, seconds later he was hit by a car and died instantly. With a song on his lips, this person left for the courthouse of God. This is man! His heart works just like a clock. If the spring that powers the

clock breaks, it stops working. If a person's heart stops beating, his life ends! This is why the Gospel says, "Every man is a liar" (Rom. 3:4). Not because he lies, but because he resembles a lie. One moment he appears great and mighty, and the next moment he

drops dead.

On account of these things, we must concern ourselves with how to be pleasing to God. God looks only at our soul and not our external appearance. The devil, however, looks at the externals. Even though we are in need of repentance,

tears, and mourning, instead we aimlessly wander through life going here and there, partying, dancing, fixing ourselves up, only to become different than the way in which God created us to be. We must beautify our soul with virtues, not our external appearance by

making our face different and altering its natural beauty. The more we try to make ourselves look attractive externally, the more we disfigure our soul internally. Have we ever confessed that we may have dressed provocatively and possibly scandalized an

immortal soul? No! Have we considered that we may have scandalized people with our careless conduct? No! Have we ever confessed that we could have done something good and did not? No! This is also a sin. God will ask us to give an account for all

these things because nothing remains unnoticed. When we make a mistake, God's "computer" records our culpability. Conversely, when we repent, His "computer" deletes the debt. God does this automatically because He is a spirit. He is present

everywhere, and, hence, without difficulty He instantly registers even the most imperceptible thoughts of all the billions of people, and records the accountability on every person's criminal record.

Heaven, the Kingdom of God, and eternal life

are open. The very moment our Christ expired His final breath on the Cross, Paradise opened wide. Up to that moment, the gate of Heaven, the gate of Paradise, the gate of the Upper Jerusalem was closed. When our Christ stretched out His

immaculate arms and opened His embrace on the Cross, He embraced the entire human race in order to grant it eternal life.

Do you know what eternal life means? Life next to God! The indescribable wealth and joy cannot be conceived

by the human mind. People who have gone to Heaven and returned revealed many things to us. The most powerful testimony, however, comes from the most-holy Apostle Paul, who ascended up to the third heaven. He states that God has such good things

in store that the human mind cannot conceive them: “Eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and neither has it entered into the heart of man” (1 Cor. 2:9). Such a life awaits man! Neither has his mind conceived, nor has his heart felt this happiness. It is worth the

effort! The sufferings of "the present age" (cf. Rom. 8:18) are insignificant when compared to the future glory that will be unveiled to the children of God. Every person who will be saved will be a child of God and an heir of His Kingdom.

We do not love Christ —and I first—because if we loved Him, we would not sin. We have forgotten Him, but He never forgets us. He is the only One Who loves man to the point of death—even death on the Cross! (cf. Phil. 2:8). He visits us continuously, sometimes

with an illness, sometimes with an affliction, and other times with various trials. It is Christ Who knocks on every person's door requesting, "Open the door so I may enter, and I will make you happy. I will make you My heir." Unfortunately, we bar the

door securely, and we fail to understand that it is Christ Who is knocking in order to save us. God forgives with great ease! —as long as man opens up and returns to Him with sincere repentance. God does not want reimbursement or payment from man in

exchange for His eternal gifts. No! Even if man has millions or billions of sins, for God they are nothing. What is a handful of sand in the midst of the ocean? All the sins of humanity are nothing but a speck in the ocean. There is no sin capable of overpowering

God's compassion.

Since we have such infinite compassion waiting for us, why should we continuously drag our heels? We should run and jump into His embrace in order to be forgiven. The devil tries to pull us backward, while God and our

guardian angel urge us onward. We will go to whomever we obey. This is what the Holy Gospel and the holy Fathers teach us. Let us not brush them aside; let us not remain indifferent; let us not drown in life's concerns. Christ's words are crystal clear: "Only one thing is

needed.” Let us set aside earthly cares, and let us focus on cultivating our soul in order to render it fruitful in the eyes of God. Death will come; it will catch up to us. Whether we want to or not, we will arrive at its black gate and cross over to the other side. There is

no other road; no other path. We are 100 percent certain that, indeed, each one of us will die, and, consequently, will appear in court. Therefore, we must be attentive!

When someone is being prosecuted, especially for a serious crime, we all know how

concerned he is about avoiding imprisonment or even death itself. Such a person searches for lawyers, tries to find a preeminent attorney with connections, ensures that everyone is paid, and makes every effort to find witnesses and advocates in order to be found

innocent. So much worry, so much distress over a temporary case! Yet, we do not take seriously the inescapable court of God that is awaiting us. We do not give it much thought. Our life and our actions prove it.

May God grant us grace, may He give us

help, may He send us enlightenment and the strength to undertake this holy "worry," which will lead us successfully into God's Paradise and away from Hell.

Hell is something unimaginably dreadful! It does not exist only in the conscience of man.

Dogmatically, according to the Fathers of our Church, Hell is spiritual, just as Paradise is spiritual. The soul is spiritual, and the demons are also spiritual. During His Second Coming, Christ will pronounce, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the

everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Mt. 25:41). Eternal Hell has been prepared for the demons; however, all the people who imitate the works of the demons will also be sent there during the Second Coming. The demons experience Hell

when they *do not* commit crimes against God; conversely, they celebrate each time crimes are committed against Him. This is why they are not burnt or tortured by their conscience like man, even though they are conscious of their actions. Man suffers and feels anguish

when he sins against God because he has a soul, he has a conscience, he is the breath of God. In contrast, the devil does not suffer —he rejoices. Consequently, Hell cannot be merely in the devil's conscience, but it is existential, and thus it is prepared for him

eternally. People, however, who are found unrepentant at the hour of death will also be sent there.

The ascetic and patristic tradition has innumerable and valuable examples concerning the spiritual existence of both Hell and Paradise in the

next life, which are both similar in character with respect to eternity and spirituality. The Fathers affirmed this to be dogma and taught that Paradise and Hell are not physical but spiritual states, which are experienced by people depending on the condition of their soul.

Purified souls will see God as light, whereas impure souls will feel God as fire.

Today many people—even theologians!—claim that Hell exists only in the conscience of man. This diminishes the spiritual benefit that results from the

awareness and contemplation of Hell, and it allows them to say, “Very well! If I suppress and deaden my conscience, I will become indifferent and will not suffer.” No, this is not the case. It is not simply that my conscience will eat away at me like a worm,

and darken me for the faults I committed against God. No! In addition to the conscience, we will have spiritual Hell. Hell is tangible: it is darkness, it is fire, it is a sleepless worm, in addition to the many other things described in the Scriptures (vid. Mk.

9:48).

Since we know the truth about Hell and Paradise, let us concentrate on how to escape Hell and how to avoid going down there, for it is not a place for the soul of man. The soul must return to the embrace of God and live

eternally with the Heavenly Father. May the only one to go there be he who started the rebellion, he who committed the crime without ever repenting: the devil.

On account of this, we the Christians should repent, we should shed tears, we should return

now—today!—because we may not have a chance to repent tomorrow. Right now, let us turn our hearts toward God and cry, "My God, I have sinned against Heaven and before You, and I am no longer worthy to be called Your son. Make me like one of Your hired

servants" (Lk. 15:18-19). Let us return directly to the embrace of the Father! If we do so, God will immediately wash us, He will clean us, He will clothe us with his grace, He will give us the "fatted calf " (cf. Lk. 15:23), He will guide us to the Banquet of the Church,

He will give us His Body and Blood, and we will become one with Christ. Then, the devil will no longer have any rights over us. This is the truth of our Orthodox Church, which no one can refute!

In our prayers, we should ask God to grant us repentance, and a good

Christian end to our life: painless, without shame, with an excellent account before the Righteous Judge, one that will deem us worthy of His Kingdom. Amen.

Archangel Gabriel

Homily 4

The Christian Way of Life

My beloved children, From the depth of my

soul, I pray that the goodness of our God grants you salvation.

Winter brings snow, which covers the grass. However, the snowfall does not kill it; rather, it preserves and gives life to it until the spring, when the snow melts and the grass begins to flourish

again. Something quite similar takes place during the spiritual struggle. The winter of temptations and worldly cares arrives to chill our fervor to struggle. However, every spiritual gathering intended to assist our souls by sowing God's word, which we—as

insignificant servants—offer by His grace, brings the spiritual grass back to life; that is, it revives our spiritual zeal for salvation and the acquisition of the Kingdom of God.

Seed is sown. Depending on the condition of the soil that receives and germinates

the seeds, there will be a corresponding growth of the plant, and an analogous yield in the quality and quantity of the crop. The same thing occurs when the word of God is sown. Depending on how it is received and cultivated within our hearts, it will blossom for

us into the great blessing of acquiring the next life.

For us to obtain salvation, we must put our life in order. Because wherever there is order, there is peace; and wherever there is peace, this is where God is found. Conversely, wherever there is

disorder, there is confusion; and wherever there is confusion, this is where the devil is found. For us to maintain order, we must follow the guidance of our spiritual father. Every sinful person who is fortunate enough to have received the great blessing of

approaching the hospital that is free of charge, which is called Holy Confession, must follow the instructions and rules of the spiritual father, so that his spiritual health is restored, maintained, and hopefully improved.

When a physician examines a patient,

depending on the diagnosis, he prescribes medical treatment with the appropriate medication and instructions, which the patient must follow precisely in order to be cured. The slightest deviation from the recommended therapy

could possibly lead to failure of the anticipated outcome and cure. Similarly, when the spiritual physician gives a therapeutic treatment plan for the soul, the faithful Christian is obligated to follow his recommendations and guidelines. What are

these recommendations? They are: prayer, prostrations, and the study of the Holy Bible—especially the New Testament, for it is the new grace of our Christ with the entire blessing of the Holy Trinity, while the Old Testament is the shadow. In addition to

this, there is fasting accompanied by attentiveness to our thoughts. We should not accept evil thoughts; rather, we must repel them immediately—the very instant they appear. If we allow them to linger, they will give rise to many thorns; and,

oftentimes, these thorns are very sharp, they induce hemorrhage, and usually develop into cancer.

God permits us to wake up in the morning; some well before sunrise, others later. As Orthodox Christians, our primary consideration, our first

obligation and duty, a spiritual necessity for our salvation, is to kneel and raise our hands in prayer to God. How beautiful are the prayers of our Church! What life-giving words! “Having awakened from sleep, we bow down before Thee, O Good One, and we cry out the hymn

of the angels to Thee, O Mighty One … .”[21] After we wake up and bow down before the goodness of Christ, we must thank Him for allowing us to pass the night unharmed.

Sleep is an icon of death, because when we sleep we are unaware of

where we are for so many hours. When we wake up, we become living people with a conscience once more. After we thank God with all our heart for allowing us to see the light of day again, we should beseech Him to forgive us our sins.

We should pray for

our enemies, for all the people who slander us, criticize us, persecute us, and make things difficult for us. This is the next thing we must do, because if we do not forgive them, God will not forgive us.

The most vibrant form of love for our fellow man is expressed and

revealed when we pray wholeheartedly for our enemies, when we forgive with all our heart (not merely as a formality because God says so), and when we love our enemies, who in actuality are our benefactors. The person who bothers us, who criticizes us, who

creates temptations and hardships for us, on the one hand becomes an instrument of the devil, but on the other hand an instrument of Christ. The Fathers teach that such a person is Jesus' instrument that cauterizes our egotism and our pride, and through him we

receive therapy. Such a person, of course, acts with hostility; we, however, can graft the wild olive branch into a cultivated olive tree (cf. Rom. 11:17) and produce a crop useful to our lives. Thus, we benefit tremendously when we embrace people who act

with hostility toward us.

People who compliment us—if, of course, they do so out of love—are praiseworthy because they have within themselves the love of Christ. Nevertheless, Christ says, “If you love them who love you, where is the grace? This is what

sinners, publicans, and the average person does. I am telling you to love your enemies: the people who mistreat you, who persecute you, and who cause you harm" (cf. Mt. 5:44-48). This is what God, the Heavenly Father does. He makes the sun rise and sends rain to both

the righteous and unrighteous, to both the bad and good people. He is the same for all people. He provides the same good things both to His children who love Him wholeheartedly, and to them who curse Him and act impiously toward Him. He does not exclude

anyone, so that there is no excuse for anyone. Similarly, when we offer prayers for such people, not only are we justified before God, but we also help them to become enlightened. It is likely that these people don't think about God, don't pray, or even make the

sign of the Cross. Who will help them? They are in absolute need of our prayers. When we pray for God to forgive and sanctify them, we simultaneously help them come to repentance. This is an immense display of love.

Do you want to harm

your enemy? The Fathers say that you must pray for him, because your prayer will force God to intervene. He will step in according to His justice, but you will be justified for your love.

Wives should pray for their husbands and their children. Husbands

should pray for their wives and their children. Similarly, children should pray for their parents. United by prayer in this way, we will advance toward a spiritual harvest.

We will say our prayers in the morning. We will do the prostrations that our

spiritual father has appointed, and, if we are physically healthy, we should offer even more.

What are prostrations? The worship of God. We worship God, something that our enemy, the devil, does not do. He does not bow his head, he does not kneel,

he does not worship. Everyone who worships God is an enemy of the devil, and hence a person of God. This is why prostrations have great significance. If we do extra prostrations, this is an ascetical effort and will be rewarded by God. The few prostrations we

do are slowly deposited in God's bank in Heaven above, and when we make our way upward, we will discover that they have become a large sum. This will help us when we give an account during the frightful moment we are judged.

If we pray in the

morning as we are obligated, prayer will enlighten us and shine like a light ahead of us all day long. In following, some of us head out for work, others for school, others for a certain task. Whichever path we set out on, we should not let go of the memory of God.

When we pray in the morning, we receive grace from God, we receive strength, we receive blessings, we receive our angel at our right side, and we proceed to our daily work. Wherever we go, we should hold on to the memory of God. What is

the memory of God? It is the phrase “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” When we ask for forgiveness as we commemorate God, He will allow us to return to our home unharmed.

We should be careful at our workplace. Many different people work

with us, and each person spews their own inappropriate nonsense. People make terribly vulgar and indecent remarks because they live in a state of vice, and they think of nothing other than the ephemeral and temporary pleasures of life. When the person of

prayer is attentive, he does not participate and does not follow the example of such people; rather, he feels sorry for them and prays for God to enlighten them. If we pray for them to cease living in such an asphyxiating spiritual environment, one day

they will step into a sunlit atmosphere and breathe clean air.

Later on in the evening before going to sleep, we should again kneel and offer our prayers to God. Moreover, at some point during the day or night, we should open the New

Testament and read at least one chapter. Saint John Chrysostom teaches that the devil flees from any home where the Holy Gospel is found.

The days, the years, and the centuries pass by like a shadow, and each one of us is heading toward the end of his life.

The life of each person is a book, and each day constitutes one page. Every book has an ending, just as man's life has an ending. Both the good and evil, both the bright and dark works of man are recorded on each page. And when a person's life comes to an end, this

book will be opened before God, and man will have to give an account for everything that has been written in it.

We should pray ardently to be found free of grave and heavy sins when we leave from this life, and with as few as possible inconsequential

ones. Thereafter, the means of our Church (such as the Divine Liturgies, the memorial services, the Trisagion services,[22] alms given on our behalf, prayers, etc.), will also help us tremendously, so that the minor sins—because no

one is sinless—may be forgiven by God without danger. The ones that pose an immediate threat to our salvation are the deadly sins,[23] which are numerous.

When, however, a person lives a careful life, these serious sins are absent. It is similar to a

person who maintains his health by visiting a physician frequently and following his orders; conversely, when a person neglects seeing the doctor, his health is adversely affected. For this reason, frequent visits to the spiritual physician directly help us

preserve our spiritual health, which is the most precious thing in the world. The entire world is not as valuable as one immortal soul. The world will come to pass, but the soul—never.

One hymn of our Church, which addresses watchfulness, is read

daily during the office of the Midnight Hour in church, especially in the monasteries: “Behold the Bridegroom is coming in the middle of the night. And blessed is the servant whom He finds vigilant; unworthy, on the other hand, is whomever He finds indolent.” That is,

the person whom the Bridegroom finds wakeful will be blessed, but whomever He finds lazy and indifferent will be unworthy.

Vigilance is what keeps man alert. Who avoids injuries? The person who is vigilant and attentive. Such a person

guards himself; he is careful when he walks, and he falls infrequently. Who suffers injuries? The person who walks carelessly. This person falls easily, oftentimes as a result of negligence.

Negligence for our spiritual obligations will incrementally lead us to a

perilous position. Negligence reintroduces everything that our zeal had temporarily pushed away. A certain elder teaches that God has no need of prayers, prayer ropes, prostrations, fasting, and all such things—we do! When these are absent, evil

finds the opportunity to enter our soul. When a person does not take his medicine, he suffers a more severe relapse. When these spiritual duties are absent, we allow the demons to reappear and re-enter our life, to create new wounds, injuries, pain,

and complications. This is why we positively need zeal to be saved. We should not be indifferent because we do not know if we will live tomorrow. Not even a single moment is in our control. All things are extremely transient and uncertain—including our life, our

parents, our children, and all our relatives. Likewise, our health, our finances, and whatever else we have are uncertain, and it is possible to lose them in an instant.

The only super-certain thing is death. It follows in our tracks. No human

being will be able to avoid crossing this bridge that takes us over to the next life. We should be seriously concerned with this. We engross ourselves with so many different matters, such as our health, our finances, our children, our parents, and many other things.

We place great importance on these things and worry about them. What we do not worry about to the same degree is the super-certain thing called "death." Death will lead us directly to God.

The Lord proclaimed, "I came forth from the

Father and have come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go to the Father" (Jn. 16:28). Man's soul will follow the same path. Man is composed of a soul and a body in one hypostasis. Man's soul, which God the Father created through the Son and the Holy

Spirit, will temporarily be separated from the body at the time of death, and it will depart for God. During the Second Coming, the body will be resurrected, the soul will reunite with the body, and man will in his entirety appear before the awesome judgment seat

of Christ to be judged for his actions in this life.

Using the heavenly light of the Gospel as our guide, we should struggle with all the strength of our soul to acquire the Kingdom of Heaven. We should struggle to be found in the best possible state during that frightful

moment, which we have not yet experienced. Whoever has experienced it can describe just how serious this issue is. All of us will taste the seriousness of the matter when we pass through this narrow gate and cross over this very tough bridge. This is why we

need to be purified. Our soul must acquire the characteristics of a child of the Heavenly Father. Otherwise, if the soul does not possess these characteristics, it will have instead the characteristics of the devil. We should cleanse ourselves as much as

possible and guard our mind from sinful thoughts, which make us fall away from the grace of God.

The Lord stated that one careless thought of evil desire renders us guilty (vid. Mt. 5:28). Many people lost the Kingdom of Heaven due

to their sinful thoughts. Realizing our weakness, the Lord shed light and placed medicine on the root of evil. The five senses that feed the intellect and the heart are the root of evil. The eyes feed the imagination. Moreover, the devil stimulates the eyes of the

soul to be fixated on all the evil images this photographer produces. Thus, he renders the heart so filthy that it is not possible for Christ to come and dwell within it.

The Lord stated in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt. 5:8).

Therefore, the unclean heart cannot see Christ. The Lord does not become visible through any tangible object. He is seen through His love, His eros,[24] His divine joyfulness, serenity, and the peace "which surpasses all

understanding" (Php. 4:7). People have the opinion that the absence of various evil thoughts constitutes peace. This is one type of peace. When, however, the Fathers speak of spiritual peace, they are referring to the betrothal with the Kingdom of Heaven. The

Christian who has savored this divine peace becomes beside himself with joy. This peace is a foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven. For according to the Fathers, both the body and the soul of man delight in the Kingdom of Heaven by means of this peace.

With extreme pain of soul, I advise and maintain that we must continuously struggle. Do not allow the wind to disperse what you have gained. You should not lose it but hold on to it deeply within your hearts. Make it a part of your life so you can come to know

the goodness and taste the beauty of the Kingdom of God. When you acquire spiritual health, your joy and thanksgiving to God will have no bounds.

In conclusion, I will tell you once more: please keep these few things that the grace of God has provided us with, and

which we discussed just now. Preserve the benefit you received during the Mystery of Holy Confession; make an effort to increase it and to transmit it to the people around you. And when God allows us once again to return, may we find you in an improved

spiritual state. The seed was extremely poor and very lowly because I, the wretched one, am beneath both the seed and its benefit.

I pray that you multiply whatever you have acquired. Pray for me the lowly one as well: for the grace of the Holy

Spirit to protect me spiritually and physically, and to deem me worthy of salvation, to the honor and glory of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and forever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

St. Luke the Evangelist

Homily 5

Warfare Against the Passions

My blessed children,

The holy Fathers teach

that man's heart is entangled with the prickly roots of various passions, which are lodged very deep within it. When a person, through the enlightenment of God, attempts to uproot (in essence, to transfigure) a passion, he grips and removes the rootlets with

forceps. However, as he attempts to uproot each passion, he simultaneously lacerates the heart. When the heart is cut open, it bleeds and hurts. If a person decides not to bear the pain, he gives up at this point, he abandons the struggle, and thus remains

passionate and sinful. If, however, he patiently endures the pain, he removes the root of the passion and is set free.

The holy Fathers (through asceticism, prayer, and God's enlightenment) struggled and forced themselves to remove gradually all the

rootlets of the passions. They uprooted them one by one until they attained dispassion. At that point they were no longer battled by pride, vainglory, jealousy, impure thoughts, hatred, or any other passion.

The saints performed miracles, and yet they

were not prideful at all. "How was it possible," we wonder, "for these people not to be prideful?" When we do even the slightest good thing, a little demon immediately begins advising us, "You are great, you are spectacular! You did what no one else can do. Yes,

you accomplished it! You are more enlightened than others, you struggle more than anyone else …" The devil feeds our ego in an attempt to deprive us of the profit we acquired through our struggle. If a person submits to vainglory after accomplishing something,

he loses his reward; all that remains is the external action. If he repents, he will receive his payment again. How is payment regained? Only when a person reproaches himself and blames himself.

A certain Patriarch of Alexandria named

Theophilos once visited the mount of Nitria in Egypt, where the most renowned hermits dwelled. O revered mount of Nitria! He went to the superior of the mountain, to the most spiritual and accomplished elder and asked, “Father, above all, what have you discovered

since becoming a monk and dwelling on this mountain? What is the greatest virtue you have found? Which virtue is more valuable than all the others?”

The elder responded, “I discovered self-reproach; that is, to blame myself and to cast the

burden upon myself—that I am at fault. The axiom, 'accuse thyself.'"

Saint Anthony the Great affirms, "If a person places the burden on himself, he finds rest. The moment he casts it on someone else, he will feel troubled internally."

Try it when an

opportunity arises. If during a temptation you blame the other person, internally you will feel troubled, distressed—a mess! On the other hand, as soon as you think, “The other person is not at fault, I am to blame. Why am I speaking about another person? Have I

forgotten who I am? I have made so many mistakes and sins … hence, I shouldn't speak at all," you will feel as if you are landing on solid ground and are no longer in danger of falling. Whereas previously, when you were soaring high, you were fearful and

uneasy: “I’m about to fall at any moment.” Once you descend low and set foot on solid ground, you no longer have anything to fear.

Sometimes we find ourselves at odds with another person, and we stubbornly insist, “*He* is at fault. *He’s* the one who

became angry. *He's* the one who spoke to me rudely. *He* must humble himself. If he had spoken to me calmly and addressed me with respect, I would have been patient and not have been offended. Hence, *he* is to blame!" Behold the passion of egotism! We

must oppose such thoughts by responding, “No, no! If I did not have egotism, I would not be bothered. Hence, I am to blame. My brother is not at fault. If I had humility, I would take this opportunity to gain a crown, and I would view this person as Jesus’

cauterizing instrument. He is cauterizing my passion so I can become healthy. He is helping me now. He is my benefactor! I must embrace him, love him, and pray for him because he actually did me a favor by revealing my sickness. If he had not spoken to

me in this manner, and if this temptation had not transpired, I would have remained unaware of the extensive egotism within me, and I would have never realized that I need to struggle against it. The sting of this temptation uncovered my sickness. Now that I have seen it, I

will make sure I apply the medication in order to be healed."

When a person comes to grips with this theoretically, he must make an effort to apply it internally. He must locate the evil within the heart and wage war against the associated passion, the

bitterness, the difficulty, and the pressure of the devil, who relentlessly argues, “Don’t back down! Don’t humble yourself! Don’t do it!” At that moment, we must pray and beseech God for the strength to trample on our ego and to respond with determination, “Be

quiet! Get out of my way. I must fulfill my obligation." We must go to the other person and ask for forgiveness. We as monks, for example, will prostrate ourselves before another monk. A person living in the world, however, will conduct himself

differently. He will say, “Good morning! Happy name day! Forgive me …” and so on. In this manner, love is restored.

When someone takes the first step to reconciliation, he immediately feels joy, peace, and relief. Why? Prior to this, hatred,

enmity, separation, and alienation laid like a heavy burden on his shoulders. There was also pressure from the devil who wanted his way. God, on the other hand, is love and humility. All of us, nonetheless—and I first—are fooled by our egotism and seek to erect

our own will. We believe that *we* are correct, that *we* are good, and that others are at fault. What does it indicate when we criticize others and consider ourselves flawless? This is why the Lord commands, "Judge not, that you be not judged." And He adds,

“For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged” (Mt. 7:1-2). To criticize others is an extremely serious sin, although we indulge in it like bread and butter, and as a “sin which so easily besets us” (Hb. 12:1). A besetting sin is one that takes place at every

opportunity and all the time.

Even though we all hobble along with a limp and are filled with wounds and sins, we like to speak about others. When we visit a hospital, we will observe that all the patients have some type of illness. However,

we will not see anyone criticizing another sick person. Have you ever noticed this? No one says to another patient, “Why are you laying in bed?” Whereas we are all sick spiritually, and, yet, we criticize one another. We have a problem with our eye, and we like to

occupy ourselves with someone else who has lung disease. Unfortunately, we wretched people fail to realize this.

Sin and the devil darken us, so that we are always occupied with criticism. “Soon they will die, and I will securely

snare them in the trap," sneers the devil. And Christ, Who is just, will ask us, "Why did you criticize and condemn others? What did I tell you in my Gospel? I told you not to judge. Who are you to judge? How did you become a judge? I am the Judge." Thus, He will

condemn us according to the measuring stick we use to assess others. We wretched people fail to understand this, and we open our mouth to gossip about others. We are quick to cast the stone of anathema (vid. Jn. 8:4-5) without realizing that we ourselves have the

anathema.

Many people whom we consider worthless and sinful may end up in the Kingdom of God; we, on the other hand, who assume the judge's seat and convict others may be condemned and sent to Hell!

We must pay close

attention to everything we do, and struggle to uproot the ferocious beast of egotism that eats away at us. Our ego! When it erupts within us, we become enraged, we criticize, we make demands, we curse, we ridicule and humiliate others. It is a beast! This

is what impels us to criticize. This is what inflates us with the idea that we have accomplished great things, that we are good, that we possess virtues, and thousands of other such things.

The origin of all good things is humility;

conversely, the origin of all evils is egotism.

When I speak about another person out of sympathy, not with the intention of criticizing, blaming, and humiliating him because of my inflated egotism, but due to a certain love and concern for him (for

example, we say that so and so would have been a great asset if he did not have this particular weakness—when we express this with pain and also pray for him), this is not criticism. However, when we characterize him as evil, label him as an egotist, and humiliate him

in front of others, this is a sin and criticism.

We read in *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* [25] of certain monks who "became deluded." How did they end up becoming deceived? Quite simply: They were prideful. Subsequently, the devil deceived them, led them

to a deep well, and encouraged them to jump in: “If you jump, Christ will send His angels to catch you, as it is written in the Psalms: ‘He shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. On their hands shall they bear thee up, lest at any time thou

dash thy foot against a stone' (Ps. 90:11-12). Therefore, go ahead! Jump in and nothing will happen to you! You will see for yourself." The poor monk then jumped in and drowned. This is considered suicide.

The fathers recorded this event not to ridicule

and condemn this monk, but for it to serve as an example for subsequent generations—so that future monks are cautious, so that their minds do not become inflated, so they do not become conceited and end up in deception. Similarly, we, at times,

recount certain events not intending to mock any person, but to provide an example for the younger monks.

In general, however, we must pay close attention to our tongue (to know when we must speak and what we should say), because we are not

spiritual people and we continually err. “It is better to fall from a height than from the tongue” (vid. WSir. 20:18). A person is better off falling from a great height and breaking his head and his legs, which are body parts that can be healed, than falling from

the tongue, which commits grave mistakes and which is capable, with a single word, to lead another person even to suicide. When we criticize and ridicule someone, we can push him to despair. Additionally, with a single word from us he

can take the path leading to sin. We often argue, "That's all I said …" Yet, look at what resulted from this one word.

A possessed man once visited the Monastery of Simonopetra.[26] After the vigil, the fathers had stepped out for a short

break onto the deck, and he was there as well. In order to lay blame on a virtuous ascetic from Katounakia, the devil succeeded in doing the following. The possessed person approached this monk and said, “My thoughts are telling me to jump off the balcony.”

The monk took this as a joke and responded, “Why don’t you go ahead and jump then?” That’s all it took! The possessed person leaped off the balcony and killed himself! The monk assumed that he was joking, when, in fact, he was speaking seriously.

Thereafter, the monk's conscience bothered him for years on end. The devil would have killed him one way or another, but he tricked the monk in order to torment him for the rest of his life. See how a single word alone caused him so much anguish!

Something similar takes place with women who are contemplating abortion. Such women frequently seek advice from a friend: “What should I do?” Their friend then replies, “Why do you want to keep it? You have so many children. Why don’t you have an

abortion?" This gentle push was all she needed. She had already made up her mind halfway; the other lady added the remaining half with her advice, and so the pregnant woman proceeds to abort the child and to commit murder. Unquestionably, the other

woman is responsible for half the murder as well!

Similarly, certain mothers with no mind give the following advice to their daughters if by chance they make a mistake: “We will be humiliated. Go ahead and get rid of it.” The young girl then proceeds to kill

the baby. Who is responsible for this sin? The mother who gave such advice! Do you see what type of harm one word can cause? This is why it is necessary to pay extreme attention to everything we say. How much does the devil try to destroy us!

When people come to us spiritual fathers seeking advice on certain complicated issues, we must examine and weigh our every word before we speak. If we add even one word more than what is necessary, someone can take it the wrong way and misinterpret it. We all

need to be extremely careful.

Furthermore, we must take advantage of our time and use it wisely, so that we enrich ourselves in Christ unto eternal life. When we waste our time aimlessly without making spiritual gains, we will depart from this life

empty-handed. Thus, you may witness your brother slowly becoming rich as he struggles and takes advantage of his time, while you the wretch make no attempt to do something good. Eventually, death will come for both of you. At that time, he will travel

upwards “loaded” with profits; whereas, you will depart with an empty suitcase, full of sins and evils. For this reason, we should try to do something good each day with the time our Christ gives to us. For example, it is beneficial when we carry out the instructions

of our spiritual father who advises us, “My child, try to complete your morning prayers, do your prostrations, and read the Gospel. In the evening read the Supplicatory Canon. Before retiring for the night, say your prayers again and do your prostrations. Remember

God constantly! Always keep Him in mind. Say the Jesus Prayer and expel evil thoughts." When someone carries out these directions, he fills the page of each day with earnings. If, however, you never go to consult with a spiritual father, and he does not put things in

order for you, then as the spool of life is slowly reeled in, you will reach the end of your rope, and you will not have many things in your possession. This is why a person's life is enriched when he is obedient to a spiritual father. At some point in the future, such a person

will appear before God full of virtues, as a tree whose branches are heavy and abounding with plentiful fruit.

Of course, we spiritual fathers also have enormous responsibility for this spiritual commodity we handle in hopes of helping others.

The fact of the matter is that our work is extremely tiring, exceptionally toilsome, and full of sorrows and grief. As Saint John Chrysostom states, “There is nothing more difficult than being in charge of souls.” We resemble merchants who

travel to various continents in search of treasures. Sometimes they return with their ships full of goods; other times, however, they run into thieves who strip them of everything—and even kill them! Thus, as they ventured to acquire riches, they lost even the

few things they possessed.

We also try to manage souls. We attempt to help others and seek to obtain earnings and profits. Sometimes, however, we are shipwrecked by the devil, and instead of helping others, we scandalize them. Saint

Isaac the Syrian notes, "We resemble lifeboats that respond in order to rescue sailors in danger. They sail in and out of the sea, but sometimes they sink."

This is why you should pray for us as well. Pray that God continually helps us and shelters us.

Pray that He enables us to help and save others until the end of our life, so that He may have mercy on us as well, forgive our sins, and save us.

ἀδελφοὶ μὴ ὀκνήσωμεν ἀγωνίσασθαι

St. Arsenios the Great

Homily 6

He Who Is Sinless May Cast the First Stone

My blessed children,

Moved by love and concern, I will try, with the little strength I have, to offer you a few words of fatherly compassion and love.

In the Holy Gospels, we see our Christ journeying and helping

people, day and night.

One day, while He was teaching the multitudes, a group of people approached Him. They dragged a woman before Him and exclaimed, “Teacher, we caught this lady in the act of committing adultery. According to the Law of

Moses, as You are also aware, she must be stoned. What do You say? Should we do this?”

Our Christ, the true Light, the sweetest thing that exists in the world, lowered His head and started to write on the ground. Shortly thereafter, He raised His

eyes toward them and responded: “He who is sinless can cast the first stone upon this sinful woman” (cf. Jn. 8:7). In other words, unless someone is sinless, one cannot throw a stone upon her.

He then lowered His head again and continued

writing. One by one, censured by their conscience that they were not sinless, they began to put their stones down and walk away, until they all departed. Then Christ raised His eyes, and, once He saw that they had all left, He asked, “Woman, has no one condemned

you?”

“No one, Lord.”

“Neither do I condemn you. Go and save yourself, and never do this sin again.”

Do you see the kindness? Before Whom was this sinful woman standing? The Judge of the living and the dead!

Yet, He did not expel her, He did not speak to her abruptly, He did not reprimand her. Conversely, He ingeniously silenced her accusers, He made them feel a profound internal guilt, and they departed on their own. Christ judged no one: “I did not

come to judge the world but to save the world" (Jn. 12:47). "I have come as a Light into the world" (Jn. 12:46). Unfortunately, people preferred darkness instead of the light (cf. Jn. 3:19).

We wretched people —of whom I am first— criticize with ease. If we

see or hear of someone who has sinned, or if others accuse someone to us, we immediately, without a second thought, without a worry, without further examination, cast the stone of anathema and strike the person, thus implementing the Mosaic Law.

We are plagued with so many sins, we are so heavily burdened, we have so many personal faults, and yet we continue to make countless erroneous judgments. Even though we constantly discover that we have made incorrect assessments in

the past, we persist. At the slightest opportunity and excuse, we immediately move our tongues, start making phone calls, and begin criticizing and gossiping. Thus, the devil opens his books and records our sin within our criminal record. Why should we

allow this to happen when our Christ very clearly teaches us not to judge?

The Apostle Paul, the mouth of Christ, says, "Why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? We shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ …

therefore, let us not judge one another anymore" (Rom. 14:10-13). Even if we witness something with our own eyes, we should question if it is actually true.

Let us go back a little and take a look at the Old Testament. The five cities of Sodom and Gomorrah

were populated by people who did not believe in God, and who lived in a state of complete perversion. The righteous Lot witnessed firsthand these people living worse than the animals, and he was harassed by them day and night. He saw their deeds with his own eyes,

he heard their words with his own ears, yet, he did not criticize anyone. And just think: He was a person of the Old Testament. He knew only a few things from God's testimonies. He believed in God from beholding the creation and the universe, and this is why

he did not allow himself —neither with his mouth nor with his mind—to condemn anyone. He had not seen Christ upon the earth. He had neither heard His teachings nor witnessed His miracles. We, on the other hand, are surrounded by the mercy, the light, and the

compassion of God, and yet judge and condemn every chance we get. Those five cities were submerged in the mire of unnatural carnal sin.[27] Lot would see and hear everything, and he felt tremendous pain in his soul. God was aware of Lot's purity because

absolutely nothing escapes Him. Before destroying the five cities, the Lord sent two angels to instruct him to "depart because God is about to destroy these people who have become flesh" (vid. Gen. 6:3 & 19:13), and to lead him out of the area.

Indeed, as the

Scriptures attest, the cry of sin was rising like smoke from Sodom and Gomorrah and reaching the very Throne of God. And we witness God, with His triune hypostatic nature,[28] stating, “The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah has increased

and their sins are exceedingly great. Therefore, I will go down now and see whether or not their actions are according to the outcry, which has come up to Me; and if not, I will know" (Gen. 18:20-21). In other words, I will descend to see if the sins of the

people are actually as bad as the stench of sin that is rising up.

Isn't God present everywhere? Yes! Is there anything in creation unknown to Him? No! Then why did He say, "I will descend to see for Myself and to confirm"? He wanted to teach us

with this example that we should not judge easily when we are informed of an event, action, or mistake from other people's lives. Of course, after God confirmed the reality "with His own eyes"—to speak in human terms—, He decided to destroy all of them with

fire and sulfur. Thus, He handed them over to destruction. Proof of the truth of this event is the Dead Sea in Palestine. A large lake containing the sulfur that burnt those people was created in the area where the five cities were submerged. It is called the Dead Sea

because no living organism can exist in it. Even if a living organism enters it from one of its tributaries or from the Jordan River, it immediately dies. There is no life there at all! Conversely, offspring that gain access to other lakes survive and flourish.

I will relate another very beneficial example to you from the life of Saint John the Merciful, Patriarch of Alexandria. This man was known for not condemning any person, especially monks and clergymen. He had been fooled once before in the past and

subsequently learned the lesson of not judging anyone.

This is what had taken place: Once, a monk had visited Alexandria, where he stopped at an inn (what we today would call a restaurant) for a bite to eat. As he was seated, a lady unexpectedly

approached him and fell at his feet crying, “Father, save me right now! If you do not take me with you to a monastery, the devil will grab me again. I just managed to escape this very moment. As soon as I saw you, something told me that you will save me. Save me, Father!”

The monk found himself in a dangerously difficult position. What should he do? How could he take her with him and lead her to a monastery? What would the people say who saw them together? He reasoned, however, that this dove had just escaped from the

hands of the hawk, and that she was full of wounds. If he decided to push her away, the hawk would snatch her again and devour her. Thus, he decided to do the will of God.

This monk took her with him; he looked for and found a monastery

that received her. History revealed, subsequently, that this lady not only became an exceptional nun, but that she even performed miracles.

However, as you can imagine, the rumors began circulating! News that a certain monk was keeping company with a

prostitute spread everywhere. People went and informed Saint John the Patriarch. After repeatedly hearing the reports and continually listening to the comments of various people, the Patriarch—he was also human—was ultimately swayed. He immediately

ordered his deacon to apprehend the monk. They brought him to the Metropolis, and without giving him a chance to explain, they locked him in jail—they even went so far as to whip him. During this entire ordeal, the monk did not protest at all. This reveals just

how good of a monk he really was. When the most-holy Patriarch fell asleep that night, he saw the monk in his dream who asked him, “Holy Patriarch, do you like this?” Simultaneously, he uncovered his back and showed him the wounds from the lashes.

The Patriarch immediately woke up and called his deacon: “Deacon, go quickly and bring the monk here!”

“Father, let me see your back,” requested the Patriarch.

As the monk, out of obedience, started removing his garment, it

accidentally fell to the ground, at which time Saint John witnessed that the monk was a eunuch. In other words, not only was he a very holy monk, but it was also physically impossible for him to sin with another person.

"Please forgive me, my child, for what I did to

you,” said the saint.

“Holy Patriarch, even though you are a saint, you are still a human being, and, as a human, you made a misjudgment. It doesn’t matter. May I have your blessing.”

The Patriarch asked for forgiveness and the monk left for his hut and

the desert again.

After this incident, the Patriarch made the following resolution: “I will never criticize a monk again, no matter what I see.” Slowly, the news spread that Saint John does not judge anyone, especially a clergyman.

When an ascetic by the name of Vitalios learned of this, he decided, “I will test the Patriarch to see if he judges or not.”

He traveled to Alexandria and acted like an immoral man, while continuing to appear in public as a monk wearing

his monastic clothing. During the day he would work in the harbor, and at night he would visit houses of sin. He would take one of the sinful women, give her money, and advise, “Stay clean tonight.”

He would take out a small icon, place it on a

stand, and begin to pray. He would say the Jesus Prayer using his prayer rope, make prostrations, and shed tears all night long. The sinful women who witnessed this would begin to repent and change their way of thinking on account of his holiness. Afterwards, he

would sit and counsel them: “My child, the road you have chosen is not good. Why don’t you get married lawfully and properly, so you can have a family and raise children? Judgment Day is coming, at which time we will stand trial. You are corrupting yourself,

you are corrupting the temple of God. Soon we will die; everything here is temporary." In this manner, one after another, the harlots repented and changed their lives. Some of them proceeded to marriage, and others to monasteries. Thus, an enormous amount of

benefit ensued.

Meanwhile, however, the mouths went to work. People started advising the Patriarch again: “Do something! He is the worst monk that has ever lived. Look what he’s doing. The Church is being defamed because of him.”

Saint John would respond, “Don’t criticize the monk.”

Monk Vitalios continued to act like an immoral person, while simultaneously continuing his mission saving souls. Furthermore, he commanded the women

not to reveal anything to anyone about what was taking place; otherwise, God would punish them. So, one by one, women quietly abandoned these houses of prostitution and returned to God and a life of repentance.

One day, as Vitalios was on his way to work,

supposedly to earn money in order to sin, he came across a young man who scorned him: “You Godless monk! How long will you continue to disgrace your monastic schema?” Having shouted this, he slapped him across the face.

Saint Vitalios

responded, “You poor man! A time will come when you will receive this slap back, and all of Alexandria will hear it.”

The saint had secretly built a small hut outside the city, which no one knew of, and he would pray there. He would sometimes visit houses of

sin, other times remain in his hut. When the saint eventually sensed that his end was near, he withdrew to his small hut, lay down, crossed his hands over his chest, and gave up his holy soul into the arms of our Holy God.

As soon as the saint passed away, a noise was

heard throughout the entire city of Alexandria: It was an echo that sounded like a slap. At the same time, a voice was directed to the young man who had hit the saint, which said, “You poor, young man, receive the slap that monk Vitalios sends to you.” At that

moment, the young man became possessed and began running through the city streets and yelling, "Vitalios is a saint! Vitalios gave me a slap! Vitalios performed miracles and saved sinful women!"

In this manner, the fame of Vitalios' holiness

spread everywhere, and the people who had previously condemned him began seeing things quite differently. Vitalios allowed himself to be humiliated and sorely ridiculed; afterwards, however, the people glorified him. With his cries, the possessed man

drew crowds of people, who followed him as he was led to the Righteous Vitalios' hut by the demon within him. When he entered the hut, he fell at the saint's feet begging for forgiveness and mercy.

News of this event reached the Patriarch,

who went there with his clergymen. When he observed that the saint had died in a position of sanctity and reverence, when he learned of his works that had come to light, and when he heard the confession of the possessed man, he kneeled and venerated the

saint. Then he turned to his priests and the people and reprimanded them: “If I had listened to you, if I had believed your words, I would have condemned such a great, holy man. For this reason, all the priests who criticized him will be suspended. You will not

serve the Divine Liturgy for three years because you almost persuaded and misled me."

The following story is similar to that of the monk who was a eunuch. A certain Jewish lady fled to a monk seeking his help: "Please Father, help me. Take me to a

monastery so I can be saved.”

As this holy monk was looking for a place to take her, the poor woman saw a small orphan on the road who was crying. So she took this child by the hand. The monk took the lady and the child, and he led both of them to a

monastery. The lady ended up becoming holy and the boy became a man of God. The people, however, started to gossip that the monk had a child with her. The monk paid no attention to this, and he returned to his hermitage.

When he was about to

depart from this life, he passed by the city again, and visited the same neighborhood where the rumors had circulated. Moved by curiosity, everyone quickly gathered to see him. He then asked them, “Please bring me some charcoal so we can cense.”

When they brought the charcoal, he stretched out his hand saying, “Place it on my hand.”

They placed the lit charcoal and incense on his hand, and he censed the people without his hand being burned.

“O people,” he concluded, “just as this

charcoal did not burn the palm of my hand, similarly, carnal desire never burned my soul or body."

This made everyone repent and ask him for forgiveness. The monk then bid everyone farewell and left. There was no need for sermons

or further explanations.

Think how beneficial these examples are—for all of us!

Our Gospel, the teachings of the Apostles, of all the Saints, of the Hierarchs, of priests and preachers loudly proclaim, “Do not judge!” Criticism is a dreadful

sin. Do not think it is something small. What did our Christ command? "Judge not, that you be not judged … With the measure you use, it will be measured back to you" (Mt. 7:1-2).

God the Father handed judgment over to the Son so that He may judge the

world, and yet man comes on his own volition and assumes the seat of God in order to judge. Christ the Son of God did not condemn the woman who had committed adultery and fornication, whereas we judge! He covered her, He forgave her, and He blessed her. What do we

do? The exact opposite! How easily does criticism come forth from our mouth as soon as we see something, without even first examining it!

My holy elder would say to me, “My child, the person who does not criticize his brothers is the mark of a saved man.”

That is, when someone does not criticize, this is an indication and proof that he is saved, that he is prepared to enter the Kingdom of God. When someone governs his tongue properly, this means that he governs his entire self correctly in accordance to the will of

God.

What is the root of criticism? Where does it stem from? It originates from pride and egotism. It is “the sin which so easily besets us”, according to the Apostle Paul. At every circumstance, at every moment, in every situation, wherever we

may be, our mouth speaks and our mind is at work. Consequently, we become terribly unclean. We judge due to our excessive egotism. If I considered myself sick, would I criticize another sick person and call him careless? Take a look at a practical example in the

hospitals. We have all been to a hospital either as patients or as visitors. Those of you who have received treatment as inpatients: Did any of the other patients ever criticize you for being sick? No one says anything because each person is concerned with

his own problem, whether it be a difficulty with his eye, a broken rib, etc. Since everyone suffers, everyone sympathizes with each other. Each person feels sorry for the other patients, so you do not hear anyone criticizing another person's illness. In such

places the sin of criticism is non-existent.

Outside of the hospital setting, however, we all speak about and criticize our brother. We consider ourselves superior and unerring. You can see the “splinter” in your brother’s eye, but you cannot see the post

lodged in your own eye ?

Even though our salvation is a serious and difficult matter, simultaneously it is extraordinarily easy because we can become holy with very simple things. I say “serious,” because if we are careless and do not attend to our

soul, we will be sent to Hell eternally. Our brain does not have the mental capacity to fully grasp the idea of eternity.

Here in this life, when we are sick and feel pain, we run to the doctor, seek painkillers, and attempt to free ourselves from the ailment in any way

possible. Many times during terminal illnesses, the thought of suicide racks our mind, even though we know that our illness will come to an end one day. Have we ever considered that we may go to Hell with the demons eternally? You should know that if we

were ever to see a demon, we would not remain alive. This is why God never allows man to see a demon with his physical eyes, because his heart would stop immediately due to immense fear. How, then, will we dwell in the darkness and endure the tortures along

with the demons? It is dreadful! We can undergo this tragedy on account of dealing with something incorrectly, due to a single careless action, a single negligence, one omission. This is why the matter is extremely serious. We must pray, kneel, cry, and beg God—

day and night—to send us enlightenment, to awaken our mind and soul, and to grant us awareness of the evil we have done, so that we may mourn here and cry for our sins now.

Let us prepare ourselves so that our conscience does not accuse us harshly at the

time of death. We will still depart with faults of course—we will not be white as doves—, but these faults will not be heavy enough to make us sink. Our good works will serve as a counterweight, which will be strong enough (when they are placed on the other side

of the scale) to hurl our small sins into the air. Our other big sins will have been erased previously with the Sacrament of Holy Confession. What will remain are the sins that even holy persons may have. Even a single bad thought or becoming

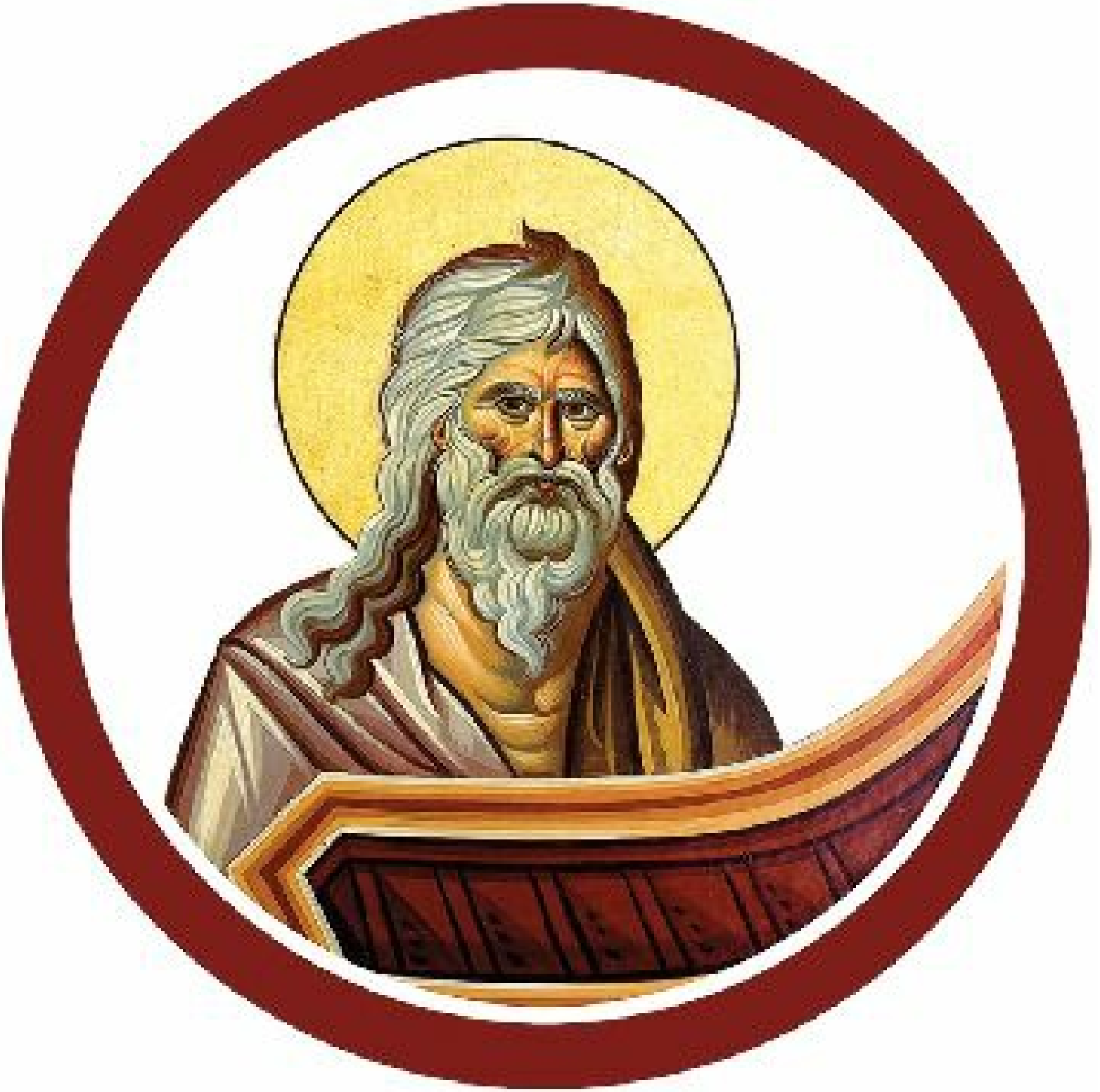
angry is a sin; however, such incidental sins do not detract holiness from a person. Insignificant small sins do not injure the holiness of a saint. They are simply permitted by God in order to preserve the saint in humility; because no virtue is entirely

perfected—especially repentance. Repentance is never perfected. It always remains insufficient and perpetually has room for improvement, because we are humans and it is possible for us to fall at any given moment.

So, my children, whenever you notice

yourselves limping in a certain area, whenever you realize that something is not right, do not leave it unattended, but apply medicine in order to heal it. Kneel, pray, and ask with tears: "Lord, hurry … correct me …" This will help us to be found without

fundamental errors and deadly sins, and it will allow us to preserve our soul healthy, clean, and ready for eternal life. Amen. So be it.



Righteous Noah

Homily 7

The Passion of Blasphemy

My beloved children,

Today we will speak

about something extremely dreadful: the accursed passion of blasphemy.[29] Our planet is carrying an unbearable weight consisting of the blasphemies of the sons of men. The earth is painfully groaning on account of this crime. We see this in practice daily.

I do not know the exact percentage of the population, primarily men of course, that articulates horrible blasphemies against Him Who sustains the universe with His glance. People commit this crime every single moment. If we take a look with our imagination at

the masses of human beings, we can estimate the vast amount of atrocious blasphemies that are relentlessly hurled toward Heaven each moment, where they meet, or rather wound, the heart of Him Who was willingly crucified for us.

There are also billions

of demons who blaspheme ceaselessly, uncontrollably, and without limit. Their life, existence, and purpose is none other than to lower God under their feet. Unfortunately, human beings follow their lead, as they continue to supplement the work of

the demons. In this manner, our good Christ is continuously being crucified by His own creations.

The Jews crucified Him once. We Orthodox Christians, on the other hand, who have been redeemed from eternal condemnation through

His Most-Precious Blood, re-crucify Him repeatedly. We wound Him again and again, and we place the crown of thorns on His Immaculate Head once more, causing Him even greater pain than the Jews who did not believe in Him. We believe in Him, we have

been cleansed through Holy Baptism, we commune Him, and then we blaspheme Him! I can say that this is the greatest of all the sins and crimes that a person can commit. No matter what else a person does, it will either be directed toward himself or toward others.

This, however, refers directly to our Christ or to our Panagia.[30]

The person who blasphemes does so not because God is to blame. He does it because some problem exists either at his work, or in his home, or with his children, or

with his wife. But instead of blaspheming these people, involuntarily and uncontrollably he pulls God down and tramples all over Him with his horrible words and curses.

Let us consider how deeply the heart of Christ and Panagia are wounded as they continually hear

endless blasphemies. Despite this terrible situation, our Christ's heart remains wide open, and He is always prepared to accept, forgive, embrace, welcome, and open the gates of Paradise for the person who blasphemes. God's forbearance has no limits.

We humans are continuously sinning, in one way or another, and thus we perpetually embitter God. Fortunately, a handful of people still exist who serve as consolation for Him: “And because of His servants shall He be comforted” (Ps. 134:14).

Our Panagia is also deeply embittered with this continuous sin! I will tell you the following: The holy Fathers of our Church, desiring to embellish the period of Great Lent, as well as to offer a special honor, glory, and veneration to our great Mother the

Panagia, appointed the Akathist Hymn (which voices “Rejoice” to Her an innumerable amount of times) to be chanted each Friday evening during the five weeks of Great Lent. We chant “Rejoice” out of profound gratitude to our Panagia. We tell her to rejoice because she

brought redemption into the world.

However, amongst these hymns, a voice is heard asking, “Why are you telling me to rejoice?” It is the voice of our Panagia. “How can I rejoice when you Orthodox Christians, who acknowledge the entire

grandeur of my Son's incarnation, reach the point of crucifying my Child! You blaspheme Him, you are disrespectful in so many ways, and simultaneously you tell me to rejoice? First correct your lives, and then I will rejoice. Then I will accept your

hymns and your ‘Rejoice’ with all my heart, just as long as you change your current way of life. I hear your blasphemy against my Son—continuously! Why do you do this? Because He was crucified for you? Because He spilt His Immaculate Blood upon the Cross? Because

He was lashed, whipped, and crowned with the wreath of thorns during His great martyrdom and crucifixion? Because He gives you His Body and His Blood unto eternal life? You impiously blaspheme His Most-Holy name continuously and unsparingly without the

slightest reservation, and then you tell me to rejoice? Impossible! Only if you change will I rejoice as a Mother for her true children."

Thus, blasphemy brings the wrath of God. Nevertheless, He is patiently waiting for us to return in order to save us.

O man of God! You are a baptized Orthodox Christian, redeemed and reborn in the holy font through the Mystery of Baptism, and you blaspheme the name of Christ, the Panagia, the Venerable Cross, and the Saints, thus rejecting the infinite and limitless

blessings that God bestows upon you?

"I don't want to do it," states the person who blasphemes.

My dear man, if someone were pointing a gun at you, threatening, "If you curse me, I will kill you," would you do it?

“No! Why would I curse him? So he can shoot me?”

What has Christ, your God and Creator, done to you? He is full of love and charity toward you, and in return for manna you give Him gall to drink?

We wretched people

recrucify the Lord of Glory, and then we expect to see better and blessed days. Unfortunately, bad and worse days come our way on account of the blasphemy of God. A certain man, who has repented and who today is a good Christian, came to confess to me. When

asked if he blasphemes, he responded that at one time, yes he did, but not any longer. He told me the following:

"Father, do you know how I stopped this grave sin? I would blaspheme extensively, especially the name of our Panagia. However, one day while I

was sleeping, I felt someone nudge me. I opened my eyes, and I saw before me a lady dressed in black. She was radiant, her face was exquisite, and she asked me, ‘My child’—(she did not refer to him as ‘impious’ but ‘my child’) —‘what have I done to

you? Why are you cursing me?' At that moment I realized that I was before our Panagia, and I was utterly thunderstruck. She then took hold of my tongue with her little hand. She pulled my tongue and stretched it out so much, that she stuck it to the bedroom

ceiling. Then she said, ‘If you want to now, go ahead and curse me.’ I, of course, could not. I shook my head to let her know that I would never do so again. She then informed me, ‘I will restore your tongue now, but if you do this again, perhaps I will take your child.’ Ever

since then, father, I have never been disrespectful to my Lady the Theotokos."

This man's entire life was once full of blasphemy! So why didn't our Christ and our Panagia take his life? I said to him, "My dear man, if there is someone

Who loves you, it is He Whom you are blaspheming. Christ is He Who loves you more than your wife, more than your children, more than your parents. If your wife dishonored you, what would you do? 'I would divorce her.' And even though you love her, what

if you were to dishonor her? ‘She would divorce me.’ Rightfully so. If one of your children cursed you a few times, what would you do? ‘I would give him a good spanking.’ Then what do you deserve? Christ and the Panagia are the persons Who love you

more than anyone else. Yet, you blaspheme the persons Who love you. Is it ever possible for a person who loves you so vastly to harm you? No! Even though you deserve to be condemned harshly for your actions, God does not do so. Has He ever punished you in any

way? ‘No, father.’ Has he ever harmed you? ‘No.’ Are you insane? ‘No.’ Rational? You are undeservingly referred to as a rational being, because a logical person does not do illogical things. Is it logical for you to open your mouth against someone who

loves you and who has helped you so much, when someone else is to blame? 'No.'"

This holds true for every person who spews this fire from his tongue. Consider just how much God turns His face away, at that precise moment, from the person who

opens his mouth in this manner! He turns away not from the person, but from such impiety and ingratitude.

Of course, since God loves every person, He also loves the blasphemer; otherwise, He would not allow him to continue living. The

fact that he remains alive is God's guarantee that He is still waiting for him. He will accept his repentance because He does not desire the death of a sinful man until he returns and lives: "Who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"

(1 Tim. 2:4).

I mentioned earlier that, usually, such a person does not want to blaspheme. Most times he blasphemes without even realizing what he's done. Was he perhaps intending to do such a thing? No. He isn't even thinking about God or the Panagia

at that moment. Nevertheless, his tongue easily and quickly finds these despicable words. This is at the direction of the demon of blasphemy —because there is a specific demon of blasphemy who compels people to commit this sin. A person becomes

enraged the very moment he blasphemes. The appearance of his soul is hideous. If it were possible for us to see the appearance of a blasphemer's soul, we would be absolutely horrified. Essentially, it is not much different than the image of the devil.

This is why the demons rejoice at that moment.

There was a certain blasphemer who was on his deathbed. The moment his soul was departing, his tongue protruded two feet out of his mouth, his eyes popped fully open, and his mouth stretched open

so wide that his jaw almost became detached. The joints in his feet and arms started to become dislocated. His pious wife was witnessing all these things that were occurring to her spouse, which greatly resembled the death of Saint Theodora's husband.[31]

Indeed! The person who departs from this life without repenting and correcting himself, especially burdened by the sin of blasphemy, is severely chastised as an example for others.

O man! Soon you will die, and you will be judged. Who will judge

you? The very person whom you are blaspheming! If you were to die right now, do you think you would see the face of God? Not at all! As you lay on your deathbed, the demons would take hold of you. So why do you do this? "It is a bad habit," you

will respond. No! It is, rather, a demonic habit. You must stomp on the devil. You must kneel, pray, and beseech God, day and night: “Please free me, O Lord, from the demon of blasphemy.” As you make your prostrations and pray, you should keep in mind that

you have sinned, and that you must stop committing this crime. Down in Hell, they who blaspheme will be hung by their tongues.

Let us suppose that a father is watching his children play. At a certain point, they become upset with each other and then they start directing

blasphemies at their father. What will this father do? He will protest, he will reprimand them, he will spank them. He will say, “My dear children, I love you so much. I take care of you, I feed you, I adore you, and now you blaspheme me unjustly on account of a

game?" This father is a human being, and someone may argue that God permitted this to occur on account of his sins. This may happen once or twice during his lifetime.

What then should God do to us, when we blaspheme Him

continuously? How do we dare open our mouth and curse the Most-Holy Lord, Who with His glance can make the entire universe tremble? How does a person made of clay dare to throw fire and wrath at God? God observes man as he curses Him, as he blasphemes

Him, as he raises his fist against Him, as he utters indecent words, and He smiles saying, “My child, I forgive you, and I am waiting for you. Come! I will forgive you, I will open the gates of Paradise for you, and I will make you an heir of My Kingdom—as long as you

return.”

Christ accepts man every time he repents! He has dispersed the bath of Holy Confession throughout the world, and He awaits to enlighten and help every sinful person who proceeds to be washed and to become a communicant of His

Kingdom. Presently, our Christ is compassionate, loving, sympathetic, and merciful; after death, no longer. Then, He will be inexorable, because "after death, there is no repentance" (vid. Ps. 6:4).

We should not fear God on account of fearful Hell after death; rather,

we should fear Him on account of His love. When we on the one hand become enraged, sin, and blaspheme, while God on the other hand loves and forgives us, this is the greatest threat of Hell for us. Is it so difficult for us to say, “I have sinned,” to repent, and to return? As

soon as a person admits, "I have sinned," God instantly responds, "Your sin has disappeared."

We witness formerly unrepentant people, with an extensively incriminating record, who in a moment become enlightened and return. They kneel, set their sins

before the clement spiritual court, and immediately receive forgiveness. No handcuffs, no jail, no restrictions—nothing! It is so easy for laden man to receive forgiveness, and yet he chooses not to do so. The devil prevents him from confessing in

order to keep him subordinated and, at the time of death, to lead him to Hell with no return.

I marvel at the abyss of God's compassion! How spacious is the heart of God, Who constantly hears such horrible blasphemies, which the demons voice against

Him!

I don't know if any of you have experienced the evil spirit of blasphemy; that is, when the demon blasphemes within man's mind. God sometimes allows this spirit to blaspheme within man against Christ, the Panagia, and our Saints.

We as monks are familiar with this demonic warfare. This, of course, is permitted by concession on account of man's pride in order for man to humble himself. Through this, we are informed that the infinite number of demons are downright blasphemous.

All these things take place under a magnifying glass, before the sleepless eye of God. Nevertheless, His immense forbearance is waiting for us to return so He can save us. He grants us time; unfortunately, we squander it. We have not fully grasped the

enormity of the matter of our salvation. We have not come to terms with what exactly will take place after death. Our life and our deeds are proof of this reality. The years roll by and vanish, and the threat of death becomes more imminent, since we do not know what will

happen to us from one moment to the next. We believe in eternity, we believe in Hell, we believe in everything that the Orthodox Church professes, but we do not move earnestly toward the direction of change in order to become worthy of God's Kingdom. Death

will come, and it will throw us into a panic. At that time we—and I first—will come to our senses. But what good is it then, when we are no longer able to correct anything?

Let us try to prepare our soul for the next life now. What will help us

tremendously to acquire the love of God is to contemplate the compassion He shows to all of us. God's tolerance and forbearance reveal His love for us. If He did not love us, He would not patiently wait for us.

Does perhaps God ask for many things? No!

This is evident in the parable of the prodigal son. The prodigal son demanded his share of the inheritance. He took it and squandered it. When God the Father enlightened him, he returned home. As soon as he realized that he had failed in his attempt to

live independently and that he must go back, God the Father exited His house and waited for him. This is how He waits for every sinful person.

Since God loves the blasphemer and waits for him, we should also love these people, and we should try to help them

stop this crime. When we witness others around us (whether it be our husband, our child, or our neighbor) falling into this sin of blasphemy, we should help them as much as possible with our prayers, and with our discreet manner. We should tactfully inform

and appropriately advise them, with love, so that they stop wounding the hearts of our Christ and our Panagia, and so that the devil can no longer celebrate. For he knows that at the time of death they will meet God as a merciless Judge, and he (the devil) will take them.

The fact that there are men who come for confession, who return, who cry and change their way of life, is very heartwarming and encouraging. This is the result of both God's enlightenment as well as the prayers and guidance of their fellow Christians,

especially their pious wives.

For this reason, aided by God's grace, let us help these people as much as we can, so that the devil continuously loses souls and Christ gains them. Amen.

The Prophet Moses

Homily 8

Bless and Do Not Curse

My beloved Christians, The Apostle Paul, the

mouth of Christ, has left us a paramount, wise, and life-saving commandment: “Bless and do not curse” (Rom. 12:14). Our mouth should not utter bitter words, should not voice curses, should not emit thorns that wound our fellow man and our brother; it

should only voice blessed words.

As we all know, a curse is an extremely harsh phrase. Just hearing the word “curse” makes us feel uneasy. Usually, curses are voiced by parents, particularly mothers, toward their children. During a

moment of anger, when they become annoyed, they thoughtlessly direct curses toward their children using a variety of expressions, thus rendering themselves terribly guilty before God. Of course, prior to this their children have been disobedient and

defiant; at times, even rude and disrespectful. However, God does not give parents the right to react and respond this way when their children misbehave.

From life experience, we have observed that curses uttered by parents, especially by mothers,

oftentimes transpire into a regrettable reality for their child. This occurs because, usually, their wrath is justified. A mother will never become angry with her child if he has not done something wrong. However, instead of becoming enraged, anathematizing,

blaspheming, sending her child to the place where she has no right to send him, and expressing herself with harsh language that is unbefitting to a Christian mother, she should kneel frequently and pray fervently to God with tears, asking Him to grant

prudence, enlightenment, respect, and obedience to her child. Who can give a mother the right to send her child to the devil? In an instant, the enemy can fulfill the mother's request and actually enter and take possession of her child. When a child is sent to Hell during a

moment of anger and rage, it is quite natural for the devil to infuriate the child and make him behave even worse. This in turn will annoy the mother even more, and thus a chain reaction is initiated. As a result, the mother becomes guilty before God with her

curses, while the child goes from bad to worse, bringing upon himself the consequential evil of the curse and anathema. Mothers, in particular, must realize that this can often become a terrible habit, and they should implement the other method I mentioned. By

doing so, they will fulfill their obligations to their children, in a manner befitting Christian mothers.

Accordingly, they should focus on advising their children with love, instructing them on how to pray, encouraging them to attend Church

regularly, teaching them good manners, and edifying them with their own personal example. Thus, with less effort, their children will find the correct path leading to salvation, and later on in life they will be useful to themselves and to society on account of their

refined spiritual state.

We have many examples of mothers' curses that took hold and inflicted serious harm upon their children. I will relate one such incident. Once, God led my footsteps to a certain island of our homeland Greece, in order to offer

the Mystery of Holy Confession. There, in a certain village, I met a mother and her newlywed daughter-in-law, who were both dressed in black—both externally with their clothes, and internally within their souls. They were mourning because the

mother's son and husband of the young bride had been killed. What led to their particular tragedy? When the man who had been killed was still an insubordinate youth, he would secretly take his uncle's rifle and go hunting. His mother constantly advised him,

“My child, don’t go hunting because your uncle hasn’t given you permission … something bad will happen to you …” This boy, however, continued to disobey and secretly take the rifle. He would leave the house and take a long time to return. One day his mother

completely lost her patience and snapped at him, “My child, since you don’t listen to me and always upset me, may you die by the rifle!” As these words came forth from her mouth, a seed was instantly planted.

Many years passed. The boy grew up and got

married. One day, he went out to hunt as usual. He left quite early, but this time he never returned home. His mother, fearing the worst—because her conscience was eating away at her for what she had once said—got up at sunset that evening, and started scrambling

through the mountains; however, her son was nowhere to be found. She returned home sorrowful and stayed up all night worrying about her son. At the crack of dawn she set out for the mountains once again. During her frantic search, she came across her son's hunting

dog, which led her to her dead son. Later, it was determined that her son had attempted to jump over a fence, at which time the rifle stock spun upside down, the trigger was accidentally engaged, and he shot himself. From that very day, his mother and his bride dressed

themselves in black, and amongst other things—as is common in villages on account of ignorance and demonic superstition—for six months or a year, I'm not quite certain, they believed that they should not attend church. This is the methodology of the devil, who desires to

deprive people in mourning from God's consolation. He locks them up in their home, isolates them from others, encircles them with a thousand and one destructive thoughts, and in the end, oftentimes, they commit suicide.

The conclusion: Even

though these harsh words were sown while the lady's son was still a young lad, they materialized into a reality during his adulthood. This is what happens in many other cases as well. Therefore, we must be extremely careful when we speak. Oftentimes a

heavy word does not materialize the moment it is expressed; it is planted, nonetheless, and it can take root at a later time when God will appoint.

Cursing is an unbearably burdensome sin, which can inflict harm not only upon the person to whom it is

directed, but, frequently, upon the person who is voicing it. We will see this clearly in the following story.

A certain bishop and his deacon were preparing to serve the Liturgy at a small village. They set out on their journey, and as they were walking

along the road they encountered a poor man who was sitting somewhere off to the side. The bishop greeted him: “Good day, man of God.” The pauper did not respond. The bishop repeated, “Good day, man of God.” Still no response. The bishop

greeted him a third time, and when the man did not reply, the bishop lost his patience and snapped, “May you have my curse!”

Perhaps he reacted this way because he took the pauper’s silence as an insult. After this incident, the bishop and the deacon

continued on with their journey. The bishop served the Liturgy, and at the conclusion of the service he felt indisposed and said to his deacon, “Deacon, I do not feel well. I think it’s because of the heavy words I directed at that pauper.”

The deacon replied,

“May I tell you something, Your Eminence?”

“Yes my child, I am listening.”

“When you cursed the pauper, I saw a crow come out of your mouth and fly in the direction of the pauper, but then it circled back and entered

you again."

"Oh my! I must have cursed him unjustly! Who knows who that poor man was? Get ready, deacon! Quickly, let's go back."

They arose and returned to the spot where they had first met him. When they arrived, they discovered that this

person was deaf—he had not heard the bishop's greeting.

A curse that comes forth and does not find fertile ground returns to the person who sent it. When a curse is unjust, the evil returns to the person who voiced it.

For this reason, we

must always bless; that is, good words must come out of our mouth. In this manner, we will not fall into this grave sin of cursing.

Prayer is the best remedy for this sin, which is so common and which especially burdens mothers, to come to an

end. Of course, even if they have been driven into this unfortunate predicament by their children, God's compassion and mercy are infinite. He forgives everything when a person repents and returns.

May our good God pour His mercy and

enlightenment upon us all, so that we repent and acquire His Kingdom. Amen.

Homily 9

Abortion: The Finishing Blow

My beloved children,

Today, our earth is

constantly being saturated with torrents of blood from wars and various other events. It is also saturated, however, with blood that is more innocent than that of Abel's: the blood of executed infants. It is the blood of innocent babies —these defenseless

children—, which is spilt by their very own mothers.

Clinics and obstetricians' offices have become the "new" slaughterhouses of Herod. Millions upon millions of babies throughout the entire world have been thrown into garbage cans

and septic tanks. People don't even dispose of cats in this way! As we have seen in a startling video documentary, the doctor, obstetrician, and murderer initially kills the child within the mother's womb using a scalpel. Then with a special instrument, he

proceeds to crush the infant's delicate head, and, finally, removes it. The mother, of course, witnesses none of this and very peacefully departs for her home.

A few days ago, I came across an article written by a physician, and I would like to read it

to you, as I think it will help you to understand what abortion is from a practical and scientific point of view. The title of the article is: “The Finishing Blow.” I will read you the original text.

“As the daily media informs us, there will be a vote. In particular, a vote

on what will be the most villainous bill ever to pass through the Greek Parliament. At a time when the Greek nation is on the verge of extinction, this decision will serve as the ultimate finishing blow. Unfortunately, this crime is becoming legal. Before, however,

members of the parliament approve the aforementioned legislation, we wish to make the following two recommendations:

1) Members of the Parliament should see the film entitled “The Silent Scream.” This video features ultrasound

images of the inside of the uterus recorded during an abortion. It is a tragic sight!”

The article continues: “When the instruments of assassination enter the womb, the fetus senses that something foreign has invaded his environment, and he

reacts by withdrawing violently from his natural position. Simultaneously, his heart rate increases from the normal 140 beats per minute to 200 beats per minute. The moment the fetus is struck by the medical instruments of execution, something hair-raising

occurs! The fetus stretches his mouth wide open and lets out a silent scream as his life comes to a barbaric end! The producer of the video recording, who is a medical doctor and gynecologist, who performed over 10,000 abortions between 1949

and the present, was shocked when he witnessed this heart-rending scene and until-then unknown spectacle. He not only decided never to perform another abortion, but also became a leading pro-life activist.

If members of the Parliament view this

videotaped recording, we are certain that they will prefer to have their right hand cut off rather than to vote in favor of such a deplorable law.

2) Our second recommendation is the following: Members of the Parliament should see to it that this video is

aired on national television, so that the Greek people can be informed that the 300,000 abortions that take place in Greece each year are not merely surgical procedures, but in fact 300,000 felonies. If, however, this proposed bill is not rejected, then

the blood of these defenseless individuals will become a pool in which Greece will drown. And then, our nation's various enemies will raise a sorrowful sign that reads, 'Greece has vanished.' For the enemies, this title will be the cause of villainous

joy; for true Greeks and Christians, however, the cause of deep sorrow and great shame."

Now let us examine what the "democratic" women of Greece are planning to do in relation to this matter. Several such democratic women's associations exist here.

“Through a series of programmed events—the first function already took place with the theme ‘Why YES to Legalizing Abortion’—they seek to remove criminal penalties for abortion and to allocate state funding for the costs of such surgical procedures. This will

mean another new burden for the government and the budget, which means new burdens on the backs of the taxpayers. They want information concerning contraceptive methods to be widely circulated. In other words, they want to disseminate shameless and injudicious

propaganda in favor of nefarious homicides, as if we have a mission to eradicate our historic nation. They seek to introduce sex education into the educational curriculum, in order to i) prompt the interest of children during their elementary school years

in such matters; ii) “open their eyes” early—i.e., before their time; and iii) avoid, supposedly, undesirable mishaps. In reality, however, this system itself will push children in the direction of misfortune. Finally, they seek to establish centers for family

planning throughout Greece. One of the purposes of these centers will also be to institute the above-mentioned objectives; in other words, to rigorously and systematically impose the beliefs of these ladies upon the entire Greek nation.”

We will say no more. We will only exclaim the following to these women who, as it seems, have forgotten their purpose, and who are determined to uproot everything sacred that God has implanted within them: Is this “democratic” demand you are making humane?

We are deeply saddened on account of this plummet and perversion. Do you see how deplorable and grievous the sin of abortion is? Unquestionably, it must come to an end. These innocent human beings must not be assassinated so lightheartedly, on the

pretense that one cannot raise another child. Are we going to determine how God should deal with us? Are we going to decide whether or not we will be able to handle all the children that God grants to our family? Will we direct God and tell Him how to take care of

us?

Day by day, this crime takes on increasingly dangerous dimensions. Women, at last, must comprehend how horrendous it is! They must attempt to stop it, and prevent other women who, under demonic influence, plan to have an

abortion, because women usually end up committing this crime due to sheer ignorance, intense family pressure, or an internal personal conflict. The main contributing factor, however, is the devil, who supplies various unsupported reasons,

excuses, pretenses, and weaknesses, such as: "there is not enough money … my husband is pressuring me … my health is compromised …" and so forth. The devil takes advantage of all these factors and craftily persuades mothers to commit this

grave sin.

I am not sure if you are aware of the fact that these embryos, these infants, these beings do not cease to exist once they are aborted. On the contrary! Each embryo is a complete human being, especially with respect to the soul. These children

live in the other world, and, as you can understand, many millions of children now comprise an entire army in Heaven. All of them protest. Their innocent blood cries out to God that they were killed unjustly, that they did not receive Holy Baptism,

that they did not become Orthodox Christians. Who is responsible for this? It is self-explanatory and does not have to be spelled out. When this blood is spilled, God's computer documents the crime. How will this blood be washed away? When someone becomes

dirty, how is he cleansed? Only with clean water. Likewise, water is needed in this case as well. It must flow forth continuously from two faucets, which are the two eyes. Internal repentance should be externalized with a lifelong, never-ending stream of tears.

The sin, of course, is forgiven from the moment it is set forth before the sacred and all-powerful Mystery of Confession, where nothing remains unforgiven. God is love, and "he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him" (1 Jn. 4:16).

However, He is also righteous (vid. Ps. 10:7; 88:15). For this reason, women who have had abortions should not feel at ease by virtue of the fact they confessed this sin. They must pour forth tears of repentance throughout the remainder of their life. Many of

these women do not feel at peace even though they have confessed. Why? Because they still have not repented internally, they have not shed the appropriate amount of tears required to wash away the blood of the abortion or abortions. Repentance is indeed vast

and endless. Our very existence and the fact that man is permitted to continue living after committing such a crime is proof of God's steadfast love and compassion. Man is still alive: this means that God is waiting for him. Since He is waiting, man must

not remain indifferent but take advantage of the opportunity.

The penance given by the spiritual father, with respect to this extremely serious sin and specific crime, also requires special attention. The penance serves as an adjunct in the therapy of

the soul; but as we have said, the faucets of tears must also be opened. These will wash away the blood of abortion, so that a person may subsequently feel communion with God. Confession alone, therefore, is not enough. What counts, what will

change and alter God's embittered and poisoned heart, what will restore it to its original condition prior to man's sin, are the tears of repentance flowing from the two faucets of the eyes. Before departing from this life, we must alter God's heart.

I will use a simple example. Let us suppose that a child was disobedient or disrespectful and saddened his mother. When the child approaches his mother and says, “Forgive me, dear mother, for what I did. I will not do it

again," she will reply, "You are forgiven. Don't do it again." At that moment, the child indeed receives forgiveness. If, however, he also falls into his mother's embrace and begins to cry, sob, plead, and beg his mother to forgive him with all her heart, then not even a

trace of sadness or bitterness will remain within her heart. This is precisely what occurs with the person who repents and returns to God after committing a particular sin.

Some people ask, “Why do people who have repented cry continuously

(especially they who have worn the raso,[32] who have gone to dwell in the desert, and who have drawn near to God and devoted themselves to Him), even though they have confessed, stopped sinning, received forgiveness, and changed their way of life?" The

answer is simple: the more a person repents, and the more tears of repentance he sheds, the more God's heart is altered. Profound reconciliation takes place between sinful man and God, especially in the case of this crime of abortion, where an

unending stream of tears is required. Tears should not cease until one's last breath.

I will recount an event that serves as an illustration:

In northern Greece, at a church visited by many pilgrims and dedicated to a miracle-working saint,

people were preparing for a festival. At that particular church, there was a virtuous elderly lady who would light the vigil lamps. She had worked hard cleaning and preparing the church that day, so in the late afternoon she decided to lie down and take a nap

before continuing with the remaining tasks.

She went to sleep, but she couldn’t wake up! She slept for days. A local doctor was called to see what was wrong with her. He instructed them, “Don’t wake her up. Something is definitely occurring that we cannot

explain medically. However, at some point she will certainly wake up."

After several days—I don't remember how many—she came to her senses. As soon as she opened her eyes she asked, "Has the vigil started yet?" She was

under the impression that she had slept for only a few hours. The people surrounding her responded, “No, it has not started. It will begin shortly.”

She believed them. When she was fully awake, she said to the members of the church’s

parish council, “Please, call all the women from the village to come here.”

When all of the women had gathered at the church, the lady recounted the following:

“Listen to what I saw! A radiant guide appeared and led me downward. We descended into the

depths, to the heart of the earth, where I saw dungeons, darkness, prisoners, and many other dreadful things. Amongst the many people who my guide was showing me, I saw the women who have had abortions eating the blood of their aborted fetuses! I was horrified at

this sight, and I heard the angel say to me, ‘Now, when I take you back up to the earth, call all the women and give them an account of what you have seen down here. Urge them to avoid this crime because if they do not repent accordingly, they will also end up down

here in this abysmal state.’’’

All of us should help prevent this crime. When we learn that someone is contemplating abortion, we should immediately take a firm stand and advise her against it. Usually women who have abortions do not see and

are unaware of what takes place within them medically. With the slightest difficulty—it also has become fashionable—they proceed to the physician and have an abortion, as if they are disposing of a dog or a cat. We should dissuade them from

proceeding to have the abortion, by telling them that this is the worst possible crime a person can commit.

As a spiritual father, I advise the following to anyone who has committed this sin, either once or repeatedly: try to heal yourselves

spiritually with tears. To speak in human terms, try to efface the sorrow and bitterness from God's heart. When a person repents, cries, struggles spiritually, and strives to make amends (all of which serve as a form of asceticism), he softens God's heart. The great

Fathers of our Church declare that repentance can accomplish wonders. It can actually reach the point of completely erasing the recollection of sin from God's heart; that is, it can completely obliterate the existence of man's sin.

Behold the

magnificence of repentance! What then is required from all of us, and first of all me? Repentance! Every time a person says, “I have sinned,” God responds, “May you be forgiven.” Afterwards, we must also proceed to receive the seal of forgiveness from

the epitrachelion,[33] through the power invested by the Law in the Mystery of Holy Confession. With the courage we receive from the Mystery of Confession and from the realization of the limitless, unceasing, and

continuous power of repentance, we will proceed to the throne of the grace of God (vid. Hb. 4:16).

We should not be apprehensive! We should not lend an ear to despair, but rather race toward the Mystery of Confession. Never despair! This is the

key! No matter how sinful you feel, never accept despair. Tightly hold on to hope. Never permit yourself to perish by falling into the depth of despair. After having fallen from one cliff, do not jump off another because this will dishonor and insult God's glory.

Exalt God in your heart to the height that befits His grandeur, for He has the ability to erase every sin. If God erased all of humanity's sins with His Crucifixion, what are your sins in comparison, O sinful man?

This is why we accept everyone who approaches

the life-saving bath and harbor called confession. This is where every ship battered from the storms at sea sets anchor. Whether it has been beaten by winds, exposed to tempests, or invaded by pirates—no matter what the case may be—it comes and slowly docks

next to the spiritual father. It may have lost its mast and sails; possibly all that remains intact is the vessel's framework. But when it enters the shipyard, all these components are repaired, and the ship becomes new again.

One day such a

wounded soul came to me. A woman approached the Mystery of Confession. I, of course, felt extreme sympathy for this poor lady who confessed that she had fifty abortions! Now consider that this is brought to be assessed before the judgment of

the spiritual father. Fifty infant homicides! Indeed, since God kept her alive all these years, it was a guarantee from Him that He was patiently waiting for her. In which case, what spiritual father would treat her any differently? I spoke to her with much compassion

and love, I tried to put things in order for her, and I gave her the spiritual medicine she needed.

Think of how many years had passed. This sin was torturing her, but she did not have the courage to confess it! Glory to God: She left with the

hope of salvation. God's love is awesome! But so is the joy of the angels! "There is joy in Heaven on account of one sinful person who repents" (cf. Lk. 15:7). When a person repents and cries for his lamentable condition, not only does God save him, but also immediately

there is great joy in Heaven. All of Heaven rejoices as the angels hymn and praise God for the salvation of an immortal soul!

"Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and they whose sins are covered" (Ps. 31:1). In other words,

fortunate is the person who has been counted worthy of having his sins forgiven. What type of gratitude can one express to God? Consider this: I may have lived for a thousand years, I may have committed every type of sin imaginable, I may have been the

world's worst criminal; ultimately, however, God in His mercy may enlighten me. I can return to His loving embrace, and, within a couple of minutes, confess everything. In an instant, I can be justified, washed, cleansed, and find myself in Heaven! What

happened to the thousand years of sin? They're gone! Don't even think about them! They no longer exist! They have vanished! You are no longer accountable! They were automatically deleted from the demonic memoirs. God has given an order! Every time you

deposit a sin before the spiritual father, God presses the delete button on the keyboard, and "click," the computer registers "forgiveness!" "Click"- "forgiveness and remission!" The grand total is zero. A clean record! How is it possible not to worship this

merciful God? How is it possible not to fall down before Him and shed tears of divine love, adoration, and devotion?

For this reason, my children, we must pass from the darkness of sin that engulfs us into the light of repentance and hope. When we hope in

God's mercy, we glorify and honor the God of love and mercy. Let us pray with repentance, with confession, with love, and with hope in God in order to advance united, hand in hand, toward salvation.

I pray that this small and insignificant offering you have received

flourishes a hundred fold in your souls, that it remains deeply rooted within you, that you mark out a new spiritual road, and that repentance always accompanies you. Struggle as much as you possibly can to preserve the purity of your soul and body, because purity

has enormous boldness before God.

I pray that the grace of the Holy Spirit overshadows and preserves all of us in Christ. Amen.

Homily 10

The Mystery of Repentance

My blessed children,

As we are aware, our

good God has granted us the great Mystery of Holy Confession as a sacred baptismal font, wherein a person washes his soul, becomes whiter than snow, and is transformed into a new man in Christ.

We must continuously offer much thanksgiving to God for this enormous

blessing He has left for us! He has kept His heart wide open for us and allows us to enter comfortably every time we desire to be cleansed. No matter how much a person has sinned, no matter how much he has rolled in iniquity, no matter how much he has

darkened his soul, he can easily and instantly become as white as a dove, even whiter than snow. Is there any greater blessing or fortune than this for man?

Simultaneously, however, something else takes place as well. There is great joy “in Heaven on

account of one sinner who repents" (Lk. 15:7). Not only does a sinful person become blissful and secure his salvation, but he also becomes the cause for the angelic ranks to celebrate with immense joy, and to hold a glorious, triumphant concert before God,

because they were informed of a sinful person's repentance.

Abba Pambo was a renowned hermit, one of the foremost ascetics after Saint Anthony the Great. At one point during Great Lent, specifically Holy Week, he went to attend church. He sat

outside the entrance and watched the monks and laypeople as they entered. With his gift of clairvoyance, he could penetrate into each person's spiritual state. As people entered the church, he noticed that some of them were fragrant and dressed in

white. Furthermore, he observed that angels were preceding and following these souls, who were radiant to different degrees. Lastly, a man with a darkened soul entered, accompanied by various beasts and sinister beings. This revealed and testified to the many

crimes he had committed.

As soon as Abba Pambo witnessed this sight, he was deeply grieved and saddened. He felt pain in his soul, and, as a man of God, he withdrew to a concealed area, where he knelt and began to pray, beseeching God to be merciful to this

man, to enlighten him, and lead him to repentance. His eyes became swollen from the copious tears, which fell and soaked the ground.

Once the service had ended, he went and sat near the entrance again and anxiously waited to see if there had been any

change in the soul of the person whom he had lamented. The people who had entered with radiance were now exiting brighter and shinier. They were covered with myrrh, which made the entire surrounding area fragrant, and their angels followed them with greater joy.

This revealed that they had derived benefit from the Church service.

Suddenly, the sinful person who had previously entered with the dark soul exited clean and white. The demons who were initially following him had disappeared. His guardian

angel was now accompanying him gleefully. The joy of the saint, as you can imagine, was immense. On account of his great delight—which he could not keep to himself—Abba Pambo climbed upon a boulder and started to shout, “Come and see the works

of our God; how great, wondrous, and glorious they are!" (cf. Ps. 65:4). When the fathers heard these words from the saint, they suspected that something marvelous had occurred. They surrounded him and began asking, "Saint of God, what is the reason

for your great joy?”

“My fathers, call that man over here. I want to ask him something.”

They called the sinful person, and Abba Pambo asked him, “Tell us, man of God, about yourself, and what moved you to come to the church of God today?”

The man then declared, “Father, my sins are innumerable. My crimes are horrible, and my actions are filthy. Today, since the centers of entertainment and sin are closed on account of Holy Week, I could not go out to enjoy myself as usual. So, as a matter of

formality, I decided to attend the service of Great Friday. During the service, however, I heard the Prophet Isaiah commanding, ‘Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean. Put away the evils from your souls before My eyes. Cease from your evils.

Learn to do good. Seek judgment and redeem the wronged. Defend the orphan, and obtain justice for the widow. And come, let us reason together, says the Lord. And although your sins are like crimson, I shall make them white like snow; and although they are as

scarlet, I shall make them white like wool' (Isa. 1:16-18). I then thought and asked myself, 'How long will I persist in sin? How long will I remain estranged from God? How long will I not reconcile with Him? Why don't I ask Him to forgive me? Why don't I change my

life, since my soul will become as white as snow and lamb's wool? I will become a new person. God is calling me; how long will I delay?' 'Approach!' 'Come!' So I decided to obey God, Who was speaking through the prophet. I made the decision, O

saint of God, to completely change my life after I exited the church. I have decided to repent and proceed to Holy Confession."

Then the saint related what he had seen with his gift of clairvoyance, how he beseeched God with tears for this person, and

how he indeed witnessed his soul become white and clean, even before the man confessed. As soon as he decided to return, the Heavenly Father immediately opened His loving embrace. God purified him and granted him the initial impetus that helps man to reach

and bow under the sacred epitrachelion.

Here we see just how easily God accepts a sinful person, how He waits for him, how much the prayers (of the angels and holy men) help, and especially the immense importance and value that we must place on the

Mystery of Confession.

If a person does not humble himself, he will not proceed to Holy Confession, he will not walk through this “low” door of humility. When Greece was under Ottoman rule, there was a certain prominent Patriarch exiled on Mount

Athos. On August 15th, our Panagia is honored with exceptional ceremonies, and fathers from throughout the Holy Mountain gather at the great Church of Protaton in the capital of Karyes in order to laud the Virgin Mary. During this period, hermits bring their

handicrafts with them, and lay them out on display for sale.

Amongst the hermits was a spiritual father of small stature who was also selling his handicrafts. He was an experienced and clairvoyant spiritual father. The Patriarch

slowly came into sight from a distance as he proceeded toward the elder. When he passed in front of the elder, he declared, “My spiritual father, I will come to visit your hermitage.”

The spiritual father replied, “My dear bishop and Patriarch, my door is

short and you cannot bend so low."

"No, I will bend down."

"You cannot, because the door is *very* short, and you hold a high position."

With this hint, the spiritual father made him realize that he will make it to confession only if he

humbles himself.

The chief obstacles preventing us from proceeding to confession are our pride and our egotism. “How will I reveal my sins?” Man is overcome by shame. However, we should be ashamed when we are about to sin. At that

moment, shame will prevent us from sinning. Conversely, when we need to proceed to this great sacrament of salvation, we must hurry without delay.

If we were diagnosed with cancer and learned that there is a preeminent oncologist at the North

Pole, we would immediately make every possible effort to obtain the required funds and go to receive treatment for our physical illness. We would not take into account the difficulties, trouble, expense, or anything else. We would drop everything and run.

We would humble ourselves without reservation, as long as we became well.

When, however, we have the cancer of sin threatening us with death of the soul, shouldn't we disregard everything (our job, our pay, the distance) and run toward the

confession room to kneel, to reveal our wounds, to receive medicine, to become well, and thus escape from the dreadful death of the soul?

As human beings, we are unaware of the moment our Lord will come. He warned us: "Watch therefore, for you

know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming" (Mt. 25:13). Run, He commands. Don't waste any time. For you do not know when the Lord will decide to take your life and lead you to the supreme and fearful courthouse, from which

no person is exempt.

We have not grasped the significance of Holy Confession and our time on earth. Our life is so unstable! At any given moment, we may be summoned to the courthouse and depart to encounter the Judge.

Now that we are still

alive, we can gain Christ's favor. Through repentance and confession, we can appear before Him with a clean conscience.

An incident involving Papa-Bartholomew[34] comes to mind. He was an elderly monk who lived at the skete of Saint Basil in

the wilderness of Mount Athos. For a time, he also was a disciple of my elder. I met him once when we were living as hermits at the skete of Saint John.

Originally, Papa-Bartholomew was a monk, perhaps still a novice, at a certain

monastery outside of Mount Athos. This monastery had a spiritual father to whom he would confess.

One day, his spiritual father fell very ill. Papa-Bartholomew approached him and asked, “My spiritual father, are you leaving for the next life?

Do you want me to bring you a confessor? I see that you're not doing so well!"

God was speaking through this young monk. His words and questions were the final rope of salvation for his spiritual father. The spiritual father collected saliva in

his mouth and spat, in order to estimate how much strength and life he had remaining; in order to decide, as subsequently became apparent, if he had to confess or not. He wanted to confess just before his last breath a serious matter that was heavily weighing down

his conscience, which he had repeatedly silenced and suppressed as she cried out, “Correct thyself!”

After he spat, he answered, “I still have some life in me. No, I don’t need a confessor.”

“OK,” replied Papa-Bartholomew, and he

departed for his daily chores. He had not taken more than a few steps, when God—immediately—judged the matter. He heard his spiritual father yelling, “I want a confessor! I shouldn’t have become a priest!” The young monk ran to bring a confessor. When

he returned, however, the spiritual father's tongue had been bound. He could no longer speak; his mind was no longer working properly. He had already begun his departure from this life without having confessed.

Of course, he panicked at the final

moment. God, in His infinite compassion, sent the young novice to remind his spiritual father, the teacher, the person who advised and confessed others, that he himself had not made a proper and life-saving confession.

A person is not

alarmed when he is prepared, when he has everything in order, when he has settled and cleared his criminal record—as much as possible—with God. But how can one set things perfectly straight with God and with the frightful courthouse that awaits us?

We are human beings, and we all transgress against God. I, who have so many responsibilities and sins, am the biggest transgressor. However, I trust that God will take into account and not overlook my sincere desire and effort to prepare myself, as much

as possible, for the moment of death. I pray that He has mercy on my lowliness and sinfulness. I must have one thing in mind: I must contemplate and concentrate on how to relieve myself from the accountability of my sins, and how I can sin less. Why? Because until the

moment I hand over my wretched soul to God, I will continuously sin! My God, help me to sin less, so I am found without even the slightest fault when I stand trial.

Our Church prays ceaselessly through the deacons who petition, "For a Christian end to

our lives, without suffering, without shame, peaceful, and for a good account before the awesome judgment seat of Christ." This petition applies to all of us. We should ask God to grant us a peaceful end and the ability to give a good account. We witnessed

souls who had this type of a blessed end, and who, I believe, found mercy and attained boldness before God. They left calmly and peacefully, despite their prior battle with the demons, with illnesses, with evil thoughts, and many other temptations. Nevertheless, their end

was blessed and thrice-blessed. This is proof that the soul prepared itself, was not troubled, and gave a good account.

"One thing is needed" (Lk. 10:41): to be found in a good state at the frightful moment of death.

I am not sure if any of

you have first-hand knowledge and personal experience of how difficult this moment is for man.

When Saint Anthony the Great was informed that his end was nearing, he began to cry. His monks asked, “Are you are also afraid of death,

father?”

“My children, ever since I became a monk, I never once forgot this moment. And this is why I never neglected my monastic obligations.”

Saint Irene Chrysovalantou also began to cry when she was informed that she

would die. Abba Arsenios, an exceedingly holy and great saint of the desert, had a rag tied to his belt, which he used to wipe his tears day and night. A holy Patriarch said to him, “Arsenios, Arsenios! You cried throughout your entire life, but you will not cry

in the next life!”

My elder would speak to us about the departure of the soul, as this was his constant preoccupation. Oftentimes during the night he would chant compunctious hymns from the funeral service and cry. He implanted these things within us as

well. We would frequently weep and lament for our own mistakes. It was not necessary to throw water on our faces—we would wash ourselves with the sanctified water of tears. This was the elder's advice as well.

According to his

words, these initial attempts served as “the good beginning,” which would in turn lead to an excellent end. He would always speak to us concerning “the good beginning,” because he knew from experience that whoever makes a good beginning will also

have an excellent end. What does “excellent” mean? To be prepared when death comes, as best possible—because no one is completely ready.

The virtue of repentance can never be perfected because man can, even with his thoughts, sin at the final

moment. How dangerous this is as well! How much skill must we have in order to confront all the things that will occur then!

At that moment, the devil attempts to evoke hopelessness and despair. He recounts man's various sins and argues,

“There is no chance of salvation.” The pain and hardship of bedridden infirmity have taken their toll on the soul. The heart and mind have grown weary as well. The devil takes advantage of this vulnerable condition, and he cunningly imparts thoughts of despair. At

that time, man thirsts for even a single word of encouragement from anyone who is present. As a result, people who are about to die surrender themselves before the compassion of God. We see tears rolling from their eyes as their soul departs from the body.

What does this indicate? It indicates that a person sees the truth and encounters the presence of both the bright and dark angels. At that moment a person sees the dark angels unraveling their scrolls and presenting man's sins in an attempt to instill fear

and induce despair. "You're not escaping," they threaten.

During this moment of desperation, when a person sees his angel approaching, he immediately turns in that direction and begs the angel to save him. While fervently pleading and

petitioning, he weeps. This is why we witness these tears in people who are dying. These things will also happen to all of us without exception.

May God grant us repentance. May God grant us the strength to face and confront our conscience courageously,

to examine and emend our conscience beforehand. This takes courage! For the deeper we insert the scalpel into our wound, the better it will be cleaned. We will feel pain, of course, but in the process we will acquire the much sought-after peaceful conscience.

How beautiful it is when a person knows that he has done everything that was expected of him!

Of course, small sins will always exist, but we should be as ready as possible. A person will enjoy the reward of his effort, pain, and sorrow that he experienced

during the Mystery of Confession. Such a person "prepared himself, and was not troubled" (cf. Ps. 118:60).

The Lord warns us, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming" (Mt. 25:13). Prepare

yourselves because you don't know when Christ will come. "But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into" (Mt. 24:43). A thief seizes the homeowner,

binds him “hand and foot,” and then robs him.

In order to become clean and free of the passions, we must confess continuously—not at the final moment of our life. The saints would cry; we, however, remain indifferent. We occupy ourselves with so many

trivial things, but we disregard what is of paramount importance, “the one thing needed”: to remember and prepare for our departure.

This is what I ponder during the day. At night as well, after awaking from sleep, I think of how I will die, and how my

soul will depart. When I bring to mind my numerous sins, I fear that even the demons will be dumbfounded. They will not be able to keep an exact tally of my various, numerous sins. I have so many responsibilities! I confess the many mistakes I make as a

mortal human being! I am so sinful. I doubt if I will be saved.

May God grant us the ability to correct and prepare ourselves, so that we are found ready. Let us attend to Holy Confession often. Let us be careful not to hide sins, not to hide thoughts,

because this is the origin of our falls. My blessed elder would tell us, “If you see a monk who has fallen or abandoned his monastery, it is because he hid his thoughts. If you see a person who is deluded, this happened to him because he concealed his thoughts.”

Many things took place in his days at Karoulia. He told us of certain monks who hid their thoughts and subsequently became deceived. Some ascetics killed themselves because they believed they were seeing angels, when in fact they were seeing

demons. The deception consisted of the following thought: “Don’t say anything to your Elder.”

For this reason, we should not hide anything. We should repel this difficulty, because we all feel ashamed—and I first. “How will I say this?” we think, when in essence it

is easy. In a split second, when a person reveals what is on his mind, he is freed, and afterwards he wonders: “What was preventing me from confessing?” It was the demon who did not want to be exposed by the light of sacred and purifying confession, who did not

want you to attain forgiveness and enlightenment. The demon always rejoices when things are hidden. Thieves do not steal as much during the day; they steal more often during the night. Similarly, the demons hide within the night of concealed

thoughts, and this is when they harm us.

As I have mentioned to you in the past, I once confessed a person the moment his soul was departing. It is necessary, O man, to prepare yourself ahead of time. When you go to sleep, are you certain that you will

wake up? If an earthquake takes place, the roof can cave in and bury you alive —you're instantly finished! As you walk about, you can become dizzy, lose your balance, fall, hit your head, and die on the spot. People also die in car accidents constantly. Others end

their lives with a sudden heart attack. Can a person call a spiritual father at that moment to confess?

The dark tempter blinds us and clouds our mind, our conscience, and our thoughts. He serves us ignorance and wicked indolence, and we forget our purpose, which is the

salvation of our soul. We all know very well—and I first—that our present life is transient and of little value. We see people dying and being buried constantly. We pass by cemeteries, and we fully realize that this is where we will also end up. We are perfectly aware from

the Holy Scriptures that we will encounter the entire truth as outlined in our Gospel, and yet we insist on remaining distant from God.

Our condition is similar to one recorded in a certain patristic text. An angel responded to a person who asked for

forgiveness at the final moment of his life, “Why didn’t you prepare yourself when the sun was shining high in the sky during midday? *Now* that the sun has set and you are departing for the other world you’ve decided to concern yourself with and to attend to your soul?

What were you doing all these years that went by? Where did you squander the valuable currency of time?”

Regrettably, we squander it aimlessly as we occupy and concern ourselves with various unimportant matters. Yes, we definitely mismanage

our time. Of course, he who teaches others must first practice what he preaches. “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment” (Jas. 3:1), warns Saint James the Apostle. As if my own

sins aren't enough, I proceed to teach others as well.

May our good God send His mercy and enlightenment to wake us up while it is still early, while we are still breathing, so that we are not filled with remorse and regret later, when

mercy and the ability to correct ourselves will no longer be available. In such an instance, it will be too late, and regret will be futile. At that time we will think, “I would give everything in order for God to grant me a few minutes to repent and return.” A person would

give everything for a little time to settle his debt with God. Now we have years ahead of us and so much time at our disposal, but we do not use it to our advantage. We possess enough "money" (i.e., time) to buy God's Kingdom in its entirety. However, we are

so frugal and such cheapskates—we give nothing to God and our soul. We allocate so much time for so many other things, for so much sin, for so much corruption, for so much hell, but we are extremely stingy when it comes to the Kingdom of God, which

is the only thing that should concern us.

The devil manages to distract us. He tangles us up, prevails upon us, robs us of our time, and turns us upside-down. And soon, when the hour of death draws near, he will unveil everything and set it forth on display plainly

before us. At that point in time, we will gaze dumbfounded at the reality and truth, but it will be too late; we will not be able to correct anything. We should do whatever we can now that we have time at our disposal. Let us not allow time to slip away

pointlessly. Only a few things are needed. God does not demand hard labor, toil, or money—nothing at all. He only wants us to allot some time to confess our sins (so He can forgive us) and, henceforth, to walk the correct path, which is so very blissful. This path

does not contain bitterness, does not lead to despair, and does not impart anything evil to man. No! On the contrary, God's path is full of light. It bestows joy, peace, serenity, happiness, and health to the soul and body of man, because Christ is the source of

infinite happiness.

The devil, on the other hand, is penniless and miserable. He has nothing good to offer, and, as a miserable being, he transmits misery to whomever follows his path, and to whomever listens to his destructive advice and suggestions.

When we obey God, He gives us all that He has. God is Light, and he gives us light. God is Paradise, and He gives us paradise. God is forgiveness, and He gives us forgiveness. God is Life, and He gives us life. God is eternal bliss, and He grants us eternal bliss

—completely free. Why should we fail to acquire all these good things? Why make ourselves miserable?

Nothing other than a little enlightenment and a small amount of effort to change our way of life is required to enter the highway that ends at the

Golden Gate of the Heavenly Kingdom. The Kingdom of Heaven is the heart of Christ. If our soul acquires the characteristics of the Heavenly Father, then as a child of God, it will freely enter into the heart of God, into a vast, endless, and inexpressible

blessedness.

Let us begin this holy return. We should feel exceptional gratitude and infinite joy for having the ability to wash our soul at all times, to become completely spotless, and thus to be led to the Throne of God in this beautiful, clean condition,

when God calls us.

Furthermore, with the knowledge we possess, we have an obligation to help the people whom we know by leading them to repentance, to the path of God, and to Holy Confession. This monumental and virtuous deed will be rewarded. It

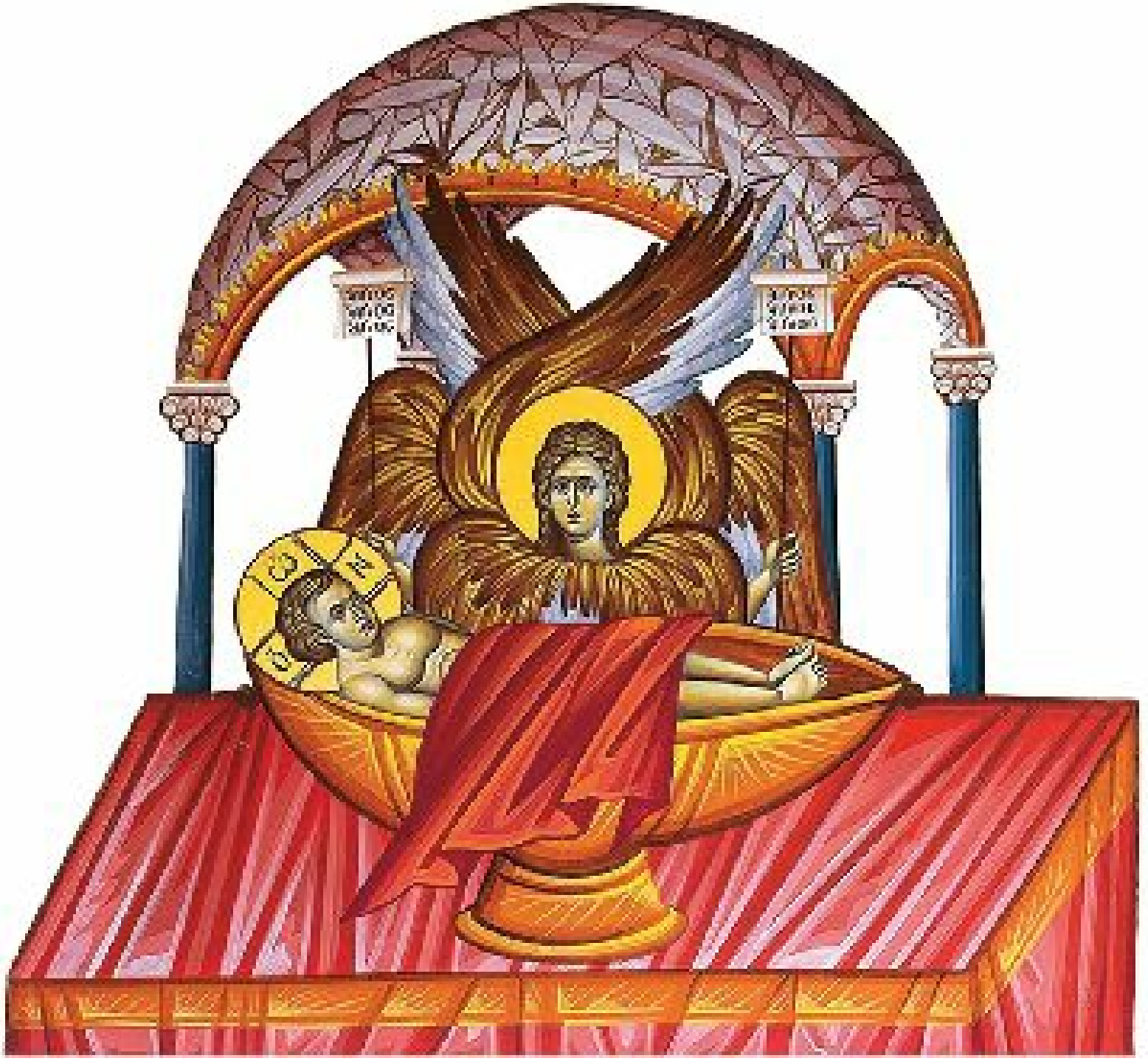
is a great achievement if we manage to lead one of our brothers to repentance and confession.

Let us pray for our fellow Christians to find the path of salvation. In addition to our personal petitions during prayer, we should have a portion of petitions allotted for

the people who do not know God. This is an active expression of love for our fellow man. When we love our brothers, we fulfill God's commandment, and we have God within us because, "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in

him" (1 Jn. 4:16).

I pray for all of us to wake up, light our lamps, and prepare ourselves with repentance as we patiently wait for the coming of the Lord, so we can enter with Him into the glorious chamber of His Kingdom. Amen.



Homily 11

Watchfulness, Prayer, and Confession

My beloved children,

Today we will say a few words concerning the great virtue of watchfulness.

As you probably know, watchfulness is a patristic teaching. It is the experience of the renowned Watchful

Fathers [35] of the Church —in particular, the Desert Fathers. The word watchfulness [*nepsis* in Greek] is derived from the verb *nepho*, which means I stay alert, I guard, I survey, I observe, I oversee, I monitor. The fathers use all the above terms collectively to

describe the ceaseless attention and guarding of the mind.[36]

Watchfulness resembles a full-size axe, which is used to chop down giant trees by striking them at the root. When the root is struck, a tree no longer grows.

Similarly, when a Christian implements watchfulness with his mind, he successfully guards his heart and the five senses—both the spiritual senses of the soul and the physical senses of the body. When the mind is watchful and attentive, when it

regulates the various impulses and thoughts as they emerge, and when it controls the imagination, man in his entirety remains pure in body and spirit. And when man is cleansed through watchfulness and spiritual work, his prayers have tremendous boldness

before God: they pierce the sky, surpass the stars, penetrate the heavens, and approach the Divine Throne of Grace, where they receive God's blessings, thus allowing man to become rich in God's grace.

The Watchful Fathers tell us that one single

thought can either raise us to Heaven or plunge us into Hell. “Through our thoughts we either improve or worsen.” If we are careless when a sinful thought assaults us, it will poison us, impart sinful pleasure to us, and, subsequently, it can render us worthy of Hell.

Conversely, one divine thought, one thought of self-denial, one courageous thought to resist sin, a prayerful thought or spiritual contemplation renders us worthy of approaching the Divine Throne and tasting heavenly things. Depending on our

thoughts, we will either become defiled or purified. Sin begins and originates from our thoughts.

Our thoughts spring forth from the five senses —both the spiritual and the physical senses. If we do not control our sense of vision, but allow our

eyes to roam around carelessly, our inattentiveness will give rise to a series of impure and sinful images. Once these images enter the imagination, they subsequently begin to drip the poison of sinful pleasure into man's heart. This sinful pleasure

serves as a toxin that contaminates the heart, rendering it unclean and guilty before the sleepless eye of God.

It is similar with the other senses of touch, taste, hearing, and smell. Each of the five senses generate corresponding sinful images, which

render man unclean before God. This is what spiritual philosophy is predicated upon.

All sermons are beneficial. Just as a diseased tree becomes healthier when it is pruned, the word of God helps to mitigate the passions. The teaching of

the Fathers concerning watchfulness, however, leads to complete purification from the passions. When an axe or hatchet strikes the root, the whole tree withers, falls, and perishes. Similarly, when watchfulness is active in the life of a Christian, one

by one the trees of passion begin to wither, and, with time, the old man of sin and weakness, the "earthly Adam," is freed and transformed into a "new man" (cf. Col. 3:10). This is how watchfulness frees us entirely from evil. Therefore, this must be

our main focus in life. If we desire to purify ourselves, we must fortify our mind by striving diligently to maintain watchfulness.

One component of watchfulness is noetic prayer. Another important element is the contemplation of God.

The desire to struggle spiritually is yet another essential part. When man strives to implement all these components in unison, with time, they lead to holiness.

Abba Paphnutios was a renowned desert father. One day as he was walking, he noticed two

people committing a certain sin. A sinful thought assailed him: “Look at the great evil they are doing!” He saw them with his own eyes and was immediately bombarded by this thought, which attempted to assault the saint’s pure soul by pushing him

either to criticize or to become scandalized. However, being practiced in watchfulness, he immediately perceived the assault and responded to himself, “They are sinning today; I will sin tomorrow. They will repent, but I am a hard-hearted, unrepentant, and

prideful man. I will not repent, and I will end up in Hell. Truly, I am worse than these two people. I am full of passions; therefore, what can I say about these people who are less sinful than me?" By thinking this way, he brought the sinful invitation to a dead stop

and avoided condemning the people who were transgressing.

He did not walk much further when an angel of God appeared before him, holding a double-edged sword dripping with blood. The angel asked him, “Paphnutios, do you see this sword? Do you

see the blood that is dripping?”

“I see it, O angel of God.”

“With this sword, I execute and behead them who judge their fellow man. Since you did not judge the two people who were indeed sinning—not just ones whom you

suspected to be sinning, but whom you actually saw with your very own eyes—but condemned yourself instead, your name has been written in the book of eternal life."

What an outstanding achievement! His name was recorded in the book of eternal life because he

did not condemn or criticize the people who were sinning. He would have criticized them had he not been watchful, had he not been noetically and vigilantly guarding his soul. Do you see the tremendous benefit that resulted from his attentiveness? How much

would he have been harmed had he carelessly allowed this thought to linger within him! Common sense was informing him that they were indeed sinning—he saw them! Nevertheless, even though logic was instructing him that things were so, the correct

way of thinking prevailed, and he avoided shipwrecking his soul.

Every passion is associated with a distinct image, fantasy, and pleasure. Murder has a certain image and pleasure, gluttony has a different one, and numerous other passions

have yet others. All these sinful pleasures constitute poisons that induce death for the soul. If we want to purify the "inside of the cup" (cf. Mt. 23:26), the inside of our soul and heart (the center of man's being), we must struggle to remain attentive at all times. We must be as

careful as possible. We must always be vigilant with our “finger on the trigger.” We must shoot our enemy the moment he appears. As soon as an evil thought surfaces, we must destroy it at once. If a dirty image emerges, we must obliterate it immediately. We must

not allow it to linger and intensify progressively; otherwise, we will find ourselves in direct danger. When evil is struck at the root, it is impossible for it to thrive and multiply. If we diligently struggle in this manner, we will purify our soul, become clean,

and acquire boldness before God.

A certain idolater priest asked a group of monks, “Does your God appear to you? Do you see Him? Does He speak to you?”

The fathers answered, “No.”

Then the idolater

replied, “If He doesn’t speak and doesn’t appear to you, it means that you have impure thoughts. When I pray, my god responds to me.”

Naturally, God was not answering the idolater; the demons were responding to him. Nevertheless, the fathers

used this as an opportunity to benefit, and they agreed, “Truly! Impure thoughts prevent man from communicating with God.”

Watchfulness does nothing other than clean the mind and heart of every impurity. Thus, when combined with a

small amount of asceticism, watchfulness yields the greatest and finest fruits of the spirit. Conversely, if we practice asceticism alone without guarding our thoughts, we accomplish absolutely nothing.

Saint John Chrysostom wrote many

chapters concerning prayer and watchfulness. Among them, he authored the following beautiful discourse:

"Prayer enlightens the soul; it leads to true knowledge of God; it is an intercessor between God and man; it heals the passions; it is an antidote

against disease, a medication for every sickness, peace for the soul, and a guide that leads to Heaven. It does not orbit the earth but travels toward the heavenly dome. It surpasses the earthly creation, it noetically pierces the air, it

transcends the sky, it cuts through all the stars, it opens the gates of Heaven, it races by the angels, it surpasses the Thrones and Principalities, it passes by the Cherubim, and once it ascends above all creation, it reaches the unapproachable Trinity.

There it worships the Godhead. There it becomes worthy of conversing with the Heavenly King. Through prayer, the soul that was raised high into the heavens embraces the Lord in an inexplicable manner, just as an infant embraces his mother, and

with tears it cries loudly, desiring to be nurtured with divine milk. It asks for the necessary things, and it receives gifts that are more valuable than the entire visible creation.

"Prayer is our venerable representative. It conveys joy to the heart. It gives rest to the

soul. It fosters within us the fear of the punishments of Hell and the desire for the Kingdom of Heaven. It teaches us humility, it imparts awareness of sin, and, in general, it embellishes man with every good thing. It envelops the soul like a

mantle embroidered with all the virtues. Prayer granted Samuel as a gift to Hannah, and it rendered him a prophet of the Lord (vid. 1 Kg. 1:20). Prayer also made Elias zealous for the Lord, and it brought down heavenly fire for the sacrifice. The priests of Baal called

upon their idol all day long to no avail, but as soon as Elias raised his voice (that sprang forth from his pure heart) and cried out with his mouth and soul, he brought fire down from heaven as testimony of his righteous prayer (vid. 3 Kg. 18:26-38). Having stood like an

eagle above the sacrificial altar with his spirited disposition, he offered everything up as a sacrifice. This great servant of God, the zealot Elias, did all these things in order to instruct us in spiritual matters, so that we too may cry loudly from the depth of our soul

to God, thus inciting the inexplicable fire of the Holy Spirit to descend upon the altar of our heart, and so we may completely offer ourselves as a sacrifice to God."

All the great Fathers of the Church, primarily the desert fathers, became

worthy of receiving the finest gifts of the Holy Spirit exclusively and solely through watchfulness and contemplation. They would hold vigil all night and would arrive at the vision of the Divine Light.

Saint Gregory

Palamas is one such example. He is the professor of the desert, the teacher of the method of watchfulness, and the instructor of noetic prayer. This saint would isolate himself within his cell for the entire week. He would not come out of his room at all. As he

kneeled with his hands raised in prayer, he remained vigilant with his nous[37] and his heart and thus received heavenly theology directly from above through the Holy Spirit. This theology brought him to the knowledge of the Uncreated Light of the

Divine Glory and the Divine Nature.

The Uncreated Light is the glory of the Divine Nature. This was the end result and culmination of his asceticism and prayer. When the saints received this Light, they also became entirely Light. And since the Light

flooded their nous and heart, what else could they discover other than the hidden mysteries known only to the angels? Through watchfulness, the Fathers reached great heights of virtue and grace.

Even though we live in the world, if we are

watchful and careful (even if we do not attain similar states), we will certainly attain a degree of purity. When we accomplish, through watchfulness, not to judge our brother, this is no small achievement. We have kept the following commandment of our

Christ: “Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you” (Mt. 7:1-2).

It is Christ’s commandment! It is not a recommendation of a certain saint. It is God’s

commandment!
Consequently, we are executing a Divine order. When we do not judge, we will not be judged. If we judge, we will be condemned. Sin is widespread. No matter where we turn our eyes and our imagination, we will detect other peoples'

faults. Consequently, if we are careless and lack watchfulness, we will constantly transgress this commandment of the Gospel— we will judge our neighbor.

At a certain monastery, there was a monk whom the devil had successfully led into

negligence. He stopped doing his prayer rule, ceased attending church, and discontinued his appointed prayers. The other fathers were aware of his negligent conduct. Eventually, the time of death approached, and the other fathers gathered by his side hoping to see a

sign that God would, perhaps, show for their benefit. The fathers noticed that this careless monk was exceedingly joyous as death drew near. They were puzzled. “How can he be so peaceful?” they wondered. “He spent his entire monastic life with

complete indifference. Doesn't this worry him? Isn't his conscience protesting? Doesn't he feel uneasy? Why isn't he despairing?" Meanwhile, the monk continued to be joyful. Compelled by curiosity, they asked him, "Forgive us, dear brother. We notice that you are

quite cheerful. We all know, however, that you were negligent and indifferent when it came to your monastic duties. Now that you are departing to be judged by Christ, we expected you to be somewhat concerned and apprehensive. However,

we see the exact opposite: you are joyous, peaceful, and full of hope. We are truly perplexed. How do you justify this?”

The monk replied, “You are correct, dear fathers. This is how it is. I was negligent, and I did not struggle as much as you. However, I upheld

one virtue throughout my life: I did not judge any of my brothers. I had read in the Holy Gospel that our Lord states whoever does not judge will not be judged. So, I tried at least not to judge. Thus, I have faith in God's compassion that He will not judge me. This is why I am

departing with the hope that God will keep His promise."

The fathers looked at each other in amazement and concluded that, indeed, their brother attained salvation very cleverly and easily.

If we remain watchful, we will avoid

criticizing others. As soon as the sin of criticism appears, watchfulness should prevent the thought of criticism from progressing, just as Abba Paphnutios did. As a result, we will avoid the sin of judging and criticizing with our tongue, and our name will

be written in the book of eternal life. When one manages to keep both his internal and external tongue clean, in order to fulfill the commandment of God, this is proof that he has found salvation.

Spiritual attentiveness illuminates our path. One road lit by watchfulness is

also the road leading to Holy Confession. Attentiveness advises man to settle his debt with God. Man, led by the light of watchfulness to this great mystery, discards his entire debt and the filth of sin. He enters into this spiritual bath and comes out

entirely clean. Our soul must be filled with joy every time we are permitted to be immersed in this bath. We should rejoice and thank our Lord for leaving this bath on the earth, for leaving the authority to "bind and loose" (cf. Jn. 20:23)—because whatever is

loosened by the spiritual father is loosened by God as well. Everything that is forgiven by God's representative is forgiven by the Lord also.

When a person judges himself down here, he will not be judged in the supreme and frightful courthouse above. It is a

huge blessing when man has the opportunity to confess. Those of you who have had the good fortune of receiving this spiritual bath and who continually cleanse your soul (each time it becomes dirty) through this divine sacrament must feel an immense

joy, because the gates of Paradise always remain open for you. And if death comes, there is no need to worry: “I was prepared, and I was not troubled” (Ps. 118:60). When man is prepared, he is not disturbed when death approaches. He is certain that God, Who conveyed

this authority of forgiveness to His priests, cannot be lying. Each time this sacrament of the Church is administered, we witness God's word in practice. When a person confesses voluntarily, with humility and self-knowledge, he feels happiness, alleviation,

and jubilation within his soul. This is a clear indication that his sins have been forgiven. And once our sins have been forgiven, then all our fear, uneasiness, and uncertainty concerning the other life vanishes.

We must ceaselessly thank God. Our

thanksgiving should never stop because we have the ability to purify ourselves as often as we wish. Whenever we realize that we have sinned, we should immediately turn our mind to God: “I have sinned, O Lord. Forgive me.” As soon as we say, “I have sinned, O Lord,

forgive me," God responds, "My child, you are forgiven: forgiven by the power of the law—provided that you proceed to implement the law." The law is implemented under the priest's epitrachelion. This is where all of man's sinfulness comes to an

end. This is how easy forgiveness is! It is a shame for man to have forgiveness so easily and readily accessible and yet, on account of egotism alone, not to want to receive it: not to want to open the gates of Paradise and to proceed toward the eternal glory of God.

Some people ask: “Will God actually condemn man on account of one sin? This is unjust. Where is God’s love? Isn’t God a loving father?” Yes, of course He is a loving father. But why do you turn your back on Him when He continuously calls you at

every moment to be forgiven? Why do you reject His mercy? Why do you deny His embrace and run away from Him? Why do you jump into the embrace of the devil and not God's? Does perhaps God ask you for money or property or slavery or something else that you

do not have, which prevents you from proceeding to cast off your debt? No!

God's mercy is infinite. We see this in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The prodigal son wanted to depart for a distant land. So he asked for his

portion of the inheritance. God gave him all that was necessary in the form of natural gifts. He did not deprive him of these. This son, however, squandered his gifts and spiritual wealth by living in prodigality. When he eventually became destitute, he came to his

senses. While involved with prodigality, it seems that he was not in his right mind. However, when he came to his senses, he pondered, “How many of my father’s servants are enjoying the wealth of his goods? I, on the other hand, his lawful son have

the misfortune of herding pigs and eating their rusks. I'll go back home. After all, he is my father …He will accept me. I will ask for forgiveness. I will not ask him to accept me as a son, or to reinstate me to my former sonship; rather, I will ask him to become one of his

servants. This will be more than enough for me."

As all these things ran through his mind, his father was already standing outside his house and waiting for him with open arms. He accepted him with all his heart and soul. He embraced him,

kissed him, and cried for joy because his son was dead and came back to life; he had been lost and was now found. He proclaimed him his son once again and gave him all his wealth. He forgave all his sins. He washed him from all the dirt; he dressed him in his

original garment; he gave him everything.

This is also what the Heavenly Father does when a sinful person returns to Him. He cleanses him, washes him, gives him the original baptismal garment, grants him sonship, and deems him

worthy of His Kingdom. All this is free. When the prodigal son returned, his father did not demand accountability, did not scold him, did not ask for an explanation. The fact that he returned was enough for the father.

Similarly, when a sinful person returns, the

Heavenly Father takes no further notice of his transgressions. As long as a person says, “I have sinned,” as long as he surrenders his sins with humility, as long as he acknowledges his mistakes, from thereon everything is forgiven. Yet, sinful man declines

to do so. He does not return. He does not humble himself, but holds on to his ego tightly. How difficult is it for someone to visit the confession room? It is only steps away; thereafter, everything comes to an end. Nevertheless, egotism keeps man at a

distance. Unfortunately, when the hour of death arrives, man will see the glaring reality, he will repent, he will feel insurmountable regret, but it will be much too late. This is why God punishes the person who does not want to humble himself a little.

What caused the destruction of Lucifer and the angels who once comprised the foremost angelic rank? What was the cause of their fall and transformation from angels into demons? Pride and egotism. This is the origin of both the angels' and our forefathers'

plummet. Our forefathers' fall resulted from pride and egotism. Before delivering the verdict of condemnation, God approached Adam and asked, "Adam, why did you do this?" Adam, unfortunately, did not ask for forgiveness. He did not say, "I have sinned

my God. I made a mistake." If he had said this, he would not have been banished from Paradise, and we would not have endured exile and all the consequential hardships we experience today. The entire evil chain of events ensued because he did not admit,

“I have sinned.” The same thing occurs today. Man does not say, “I have sinned,” and so he persists in his evil ways. However, as soon as man confesses, God stretches out His forgiving arms and accepts him.

I repeat: We should feel immense joy because

as Orthodox Christians we have the ability to approach the Mystery of Holy Confession. Every time we fall into a sin or evil, we can immediately run to correct it and preserve the health of our soul. Thus, when death comes, we will proceed to meet Christ cleansed,

repentant, having returned as the prodigal son, and our Heavenly Father will receive us and place us in the Paradise of unending eternal bliss, which cannot be compared to anything earthly.

The Apostle Paul ascended to the third heaven, where he saw the

eternal riches; nevertheless, he was unable to express in human words—even with his apostolic and grace-filled tongue—the things found in Paradise and in the other life! (vid. 1 Cor. 2:9).

For this reason, with much desire, love, and

gratitude, we should hasten to cleanse and prepare ourselves; so when death comes, we may depart in peace. Amen.

Homily 12

Pain, Sorrow, and Love

My beloved children, Job the extraordinary

athlete, the giant of patience and long-suffering submission to God's will, stated that it is a wonder if anyone went through this life without sorrows. That is to say, any person who has walked on the earth without sighing, without experiencing difficulties,

pain, and sadness, is a wonder. The word "wonder" signifies an extraordinary, unrealistic, and supernatural phenomenon. It is impossible for a normal human being to live his life without pain and suffering.

Pain and suffering are

the companions of every mortal man. Who has not felt pain and has not cried in this life? From the very moment a person is born, his first breath of air in the present life begins with tears, and he abandons this present life also with tears. We witness this in people

who are about to die. When their soul is ready to depart from their body, at least one tear will roll down their cheek. This occurs not only with adults, who are liable to have many sins; this tear is even seen flowing from infants and small children.

Job, the great saint of the Old Testament suffered terribly, even though he was the most virtuous person on earth. He was the most righteous man, as God Himself attested.

Nevertheless, we see him being cut to pieces by pain. All of his children

were killed in one night; everything he had in his possession vanished; he lost his health; and, finally, his wife evoked him to blaspheme God. Even though all the odds were against him, he remained faithful, and, in the end, God affirmed, “I tested you, and I allowed

all these things to happen, so I can render you holy" (cf. Job 40:8): a holy example of patience and long-suffering in sorrows —because absolutely nothing happens without the will of God.

Pain and sorrow accompany man in this life. How many people

upon the earth suffer grievously from various sorrows and afflictions!

However, the most dreadful torment, the worst sorrow, the most fearsome despair that pierces like a double-edged sword is experienced by the souls who have departed from

this life and who are now found in the other world. Not the souls of the saints and the righteous who left the present life of lamentation and reposed in the serenity and glory of God. No! The pain and sorrows of this life have ended for these righteous people, and now they are

in a place of eternal rest. But alas, unbearable pain afflicts the souls who failed to be saved, who are being detained in an eternal jail, and who will stand trial during the Second Coming. They tremble and fear as they think of the frightful day of Judgment, when they

will be condemned to a horrific Hell.

There are millions, perhaps even billions, of people who are presently found in tremendous and endless misfortune. These people are being held in custody, as prisoners waiting to receive their final sentence from the

Supreme Court prior to being chained and sent definitively to prison camps. Right now they are in detention centers enjoying minor consolation until the actual trial takes place. These souls experience utmost and unimaginable pain as they taste and

foresee the dismal future state that awaits them, as dictated by the divine law. God's law no longer escapes them as it did when they lived on the earth with indifference. They paid absolutely no attention to His commandments then. Now they have been

apprehended and have been found guilty by the law, which they can no longer evade. These people truly suffer a dreadful agony and horrible affliction, and they endure inconceivable hardship.

God has revealed to many of His servants

where these people are. They have visited and met these souls. These condemned souls ask for help with their appealing gaze—a sight which is indeed quite moving. Who can help them? Of course the saints and the righteous in Heaven are praying for them. But we

wretched people who have not yet left for the other world are also obligated to pray for these souls, because we also experience pain here in this life.

Don’t we encounter pain, sorrows, and afflictions? So many things sharply pierce our

soul right to the core! The hardship of orphanhood, illness, misfortune, death, and thousands of other sorrows, which arise from time to time, turn our life into a nightmare.

Pain originated from the first created people. They were created holy. They were the most

beautiful creatures, and they reigned within the initial, virgin kingdom of Paradise, which was the product of God's love, compassion, wisdom, and grandeur. Within Paradise they enjoyed extraordinary delight, primarily from the Holy Spirit Who dwelled

markedly within them. However, from the moment they disobeyed God and acted disrespectfully, they fell away from grace, the Holy Spirit abandoned them, and God sent His angel with a sword to expel them.

Think of the pain and

sorrow the first created people experienced when they were forever banished from Paradise and led away by the angel into the exile of the present life. Imagine if we were to lose our home and be left out on the street. Oh, what anguish, sorrow, bewilderment,

and misfortune would overtake us! Think of the overwhelming pain they felt as they abandoned eternal life—because death did not exist and had not entered into their life until then. Death ensued as a result of their disobedience. Ever since then, pain and sorrow

accompany every human being upon the earth. This is why we constantly reap the consequential fruits of exile.

From our own pain and sorrow, we can infer the degree of pain and misfortune that exists for people who are found in the eternal detention

centers of the other world. With this in mind, let us always pray for them. May their pain and suffering become our own pain and suffering, so that God may be appeased, show His mercy, and forgive their sins prior to the great day of Judgment, when nothing

can be resolved. Now, everything can still be changed and corrected; it is a time of acceptance and a "day of salvation" (cf. 2 Cor. 6:2), both for us and for these departed souls.

Imagine if we were in their position, and others down here on earth were

speaking about our remission and freedom. Oh, what joy we would feel! Oh, how much gratitude we would have for the people who interceded and prayed for our eternal liberation. Oh, how happy these prisoners would feel if they received their release

papers after certain people on the outside, in the free world, bailed them out. In their state of hopelessness, they would suddenly be notified that someone has paid their debt, and they would receive their release papers. They would exit confinement, reunite with

their families, see the light of day, walk unrestricted by handcuffs and chains, and no longer be dressed with ragged clothing. They would be able to enjoy a hot meal outside the misery and confinement of prison. The fact that they would breathe fresh air and walk

freely without fear of being monitored by the police would be a source of immense happiness for these freed prisoners. But what is the present life with its temporary freedom in comparison to eternity? Even so, it is huge for a confined prisoner. Therefore, let us

give this joy to the people who are bound with the chains of condemnation.

Our loving concern for the souls of these people has tremendous spiritual value and significance before our merciful Lord. Let us show this type of mercy, and let us not decline to

pray for them on account of our unworthiness. Yes, we are unworthy—and I am first. We are not worthy of being heard because our debt is also immense in God's eyes. We are also at fault; we are not free either. However, God will note and be pleased with our

love. He will overlook our soul's culpability and have mercy on these people.

Saint Makarios the Great was a notable ascetic who performed many miracles and who had great boldness before God. One day as he was walking in the desert, he

came across a human skull. He tapped it with his staff and asked, “Who were you when you were alive?”

A voice was then heard from the skull responding, “I was a priest of the idols. You are Makarios, the saint of God, whose prayers reach

even us the unbelievers."

"What benefit do you unbelieving idolaters receive from the prayers of Christians?"

"We receive great benefit! When you pray for the entire world and for all the departed souls, we also receive a small amount of help. The

benefit comes in the form of a tiny ray of light that reaches us down in the darkness of Hell, and with this little amount of light we see each other's backside. In this manner we realize that each one of us is not alone, but there are many people with us; this is a form of

consolation for us."

"It is consolation for one person to see the backside of another, and to be informed that you are not alone but there are many others with you? This comforts you?"

"Yes, this is consolation for us because, in addition to

everything else in Hell, we also feel the hell of loneliness.”

Deeply grieved, the saint tapped the skull once more and pondered, “Just think! This is consolation!”

We all have relatives who have departed from this life. The pain we feel

for our loved ones must expand to encompass all the souls of the other world. Not only are there saints in Heaven, but there are also people in Hell. These people are also our brothers; they are souls for whom Christ was crucified. It is an invaluable act of charity

to pray for these people. If possible, we should shed one tear for them every day. Their pain, misfortune, agony, hopelessness, and despair must become our own pain and concern. We should think, “What will become of these people? Will they remain like this

in Hell eternally?”

Even though He was God, when our God-man Jesus Christ descended to the earth to sacrifice Himself, He also experienced pain and sorrow. He carried the Cross of pain, as we clearly see reflected in the Holy Passion He

endured.

Who then has the right to go through life exempt from pain and sorrow? Absolutely no one has this privilege! Anyone who desires to pass this present life "painlessly" must ask himself, "How can I make such a request when my

Savior and God expired His last breath upon the Cross, in such extreme physical and spiritual agony!" As God, He knew that not all of mankind, but only a small portion, would be saved through His Cross, His sacrifice, and His Most-Precious Blood. This knowledge

was extremely painful for Him. He knew that Satan would also obtain a portion of the flock for himself, and that, perhaps, this portion would be greater than His own: “Few will be saved” (cf. Lk. 13:23).

The question arises: “Why does God allow

man's life to be inundated with pain and sorrow from the moment of birth until death?" Of course, we know that it is the result and the aftermath of exile. God realized that pain and suffering are the means and the medicine that heal man spiritually, restore him to health, and

render him worthy of salvation. Man feels pain here in order to avoid pain above; he cries here so he does not cry above.

This is why we shed tears of pain and sorrow here: to avoid mourning and crying eternally. “The Lord God will remove every tear from their

eyes; there will be no sorrow, pain, or sigh" (cf. Rev. 21:4), for the saved people in the next life.

Oftentimes we do not lead a careful life and we take a wrong turn. God then puts up a barrier to stop our downhill slide. The barricade He raises may be extremely harsh,

severe, and bitter. Man usually objects to the affliction and misfortune; however, like a wise physician, God uses these means to cure evil. Countless people attribute their return to God to a certain distressing adversity in their life.

Some time ago, I met

a lady who had two small children (one was three and the other was four or five years old). As she was walking with her younger daughter, I'm not sure how it happened exactly, the little girl wandered off unnoticed. At that moment, a young man driving by on a

motorcycle hit the girl, threw her several feet into the air, and left her dead on the spot. For the parents, this is something unbearably painful! It is bitter poison; it is harsh medicine.

The lady and her husband sank into a deep depression. They were

banging their heads against the wall. Despair drove them to the limits of suicide. During this painful operation by the Great Physician, however, they found their path to salvation. This misfortune prompted them to seek the advice of a spiritual father. She called me and

wrote to me, and I met with her. I told her, “My child, God allowed this to happen to you on account of His enormous and infinite fatherly love because, evidently, both you and your husband had taken the wrong path in life. God wanted to save you; this is why He

permitted this event to take place in your life. Follow Him; accept the medicine. I know it is bitter, but it will cleanse you thoroughly." Sensing this reality, she confessed, "Indeed, Father. This is the truth. We were on a downhill slide. We had no idea

where we were heading. We knew nothing about God or our faith. This really shook us up for good. It was a massive earthquake that leveled our old home." "Yes," I agreed. "Now He is building a new, beautiful, and anti-seismic home for you. You can have

another child to take the place of your daughter, but your salvation would not have taken place any other way." Now this couple is on the path of God. They struggle spiritually, and they are walking on the bright road of repentance and return. Behold the product

of sorrow! Behold the beneficial results of pain!

Pain is the greatest, harshest, and strongest medicine, which God reserves for people who have not yet discovered the path of return and repentance.

Nothing on the earth happens by chance.

Nothing happens without God's Providence. We oppose Divine Providence and grumble, just as a child does when his parents deny one of his requests. A child reacts adversely on account of his ego and foolishly persists asking. He may even curse his parents or

leave home if he doesn't get his way. A sensible and prudent child, however, will realize that his parents know best. They are older than him. They cannot fulfill his request today due to some difficulty, but they will do so tomorrow. They don't have the money

right now, they are living on rent, his father can't work, etc. The difficulty, though, will end and better days will come, at which time they will give the child what he seeks. If they forbid the child to wander around at night, they must know something, because the

night brings many evils. If the child is sensible, he will perceive his parents' love even if they deny his request. The illogical child, however, will react adversely and ultimately suffer the implications and ill consequences of disobedience.

Similarly, sometimes

God does not fulfill our own will but allows us to face a trial. If we refuse to accept it, we deprive ourselves of the benefit that ensues from submitting to His will, and we will suffer some adversity. When we start to blaspheme and curse God, make disrespectful

gestures, and become filled with indignation, we commit serious offenses. God is trying to apply medicine. How will a surgeon respond after performing an operation if the patient reacts (to the pain he feels) by pulling out the stitches, ripping the gauze, and

kicking and screaming at the doctor? The physician did not perform the surgery to harm the patient but to heal him. With his irrational conduct, the patient jeopardizes his health.

This is exactly how we behave when we refuse to accept the trials

that God permits for our spiritual edification. Let us wholeheartedly welcome pain, sorrow, and trials as medicine from God. Let us endure the bitterness and difficulty. Let us generously thank Him and gratefully acknowledge that, as a Father, He does

not make mistakes. A loving father and mother never want anything bad for their child. Therefore, we should be receptive to God's love, which we have repeatedly witnessed in practice.

Let's put aside the mysteries that we cannot comprehend, and let us

look at our Christ in the flesh. Let us consider His moving and dramatic Divine Crucifixion. Let us see how He sacrificed His life for us. This alone stands as unequivocal testimony of His love for our salvation. Therefore, let us dispel every doubt concerning His love. No

one has ever offered us such sacrificial love. He is the only One Who sacrificed Himself for our salvation.

Let us endure pain and suffering, and let us pray for every afflicted person. Think of how many people painfully sigh upon the earth. Take a

look at the hospitals. Take a look at the psychiatric wards and consider all the people who suffer from psychological disorders. If you have ever experienced even a mild mental illness, you can appreciate how dreadful this is. Bring to mind the people who are under

demonic influence. They endure tremendous pain and demonic activity internally, and their life is a martyrdom. When exorcism prayers are read, these people bellow uncontrollably. Think of the pain these souls endure!

Let us not examine

why such people have been disciplined by God in this manner. Only look at the pain and the sorrow. Consider that it is not easy for such a soul to be freed from the demonic influence.

We, who are supposedly “healthy,” are called to remember these

people. These people should not be absent from our prayers and thoughts. We should beseech God to endow them with patience, to lighten their burden, and to grant them healing. We must make our brothers' pain a part of us. If we do not act in this manner, we do not

have love. If we neglect them, we are foreign to God's love. God is testing them in order to place them in His Kingdom.

Let us also remember the people who lie in agony on their deathbed. As their life is about to be examined, their conscience sharply

accuses them: “What will happen now?” Their pain and apprehension must become our own. Then, God Who “examines the heart and the reins” (Ps. 7:9; Jer. 17:10) will take note of this love, He will mark it down and owe us. He will not only reward us in the next life, but

also in this life. There will come a time when we will find ourselves in similar difficulty, and He will help us. He will enlighten others to pray for us, just as we had once done.

We will reap whatever we sow. If a farmer sows wheat, he will reap wheat.

If he sows weeds, he will reap thorns. Depending on the seed that is planted, the earth yields an analogous crop for the farmer. The living God, Who knows the hidden things of man, will reward us justly and fairly!

We should keep the

eyes of our soul continuously open to see the truth. This is the truth —let's not forget it. When we hold on to the truth, we have nothing to fear. When Pilate asked our Christ who He was, and informed Him that he had the power to free Him or crucify Him, our Christ

responded, “You would have no authority at all over Me, if it had not been given to you from above. I have come to bear witness to the truth” (Jn. 19:11 & 18:37). Pilate then asked, “What is truth?” However, he immediately left the room because he was not

worthy of hearing “what the truth is.” In order for someone to recognize the truth, he must be worthy. Thus, the truth will free him from the lie and deception of condemnation. What is the truth? It is this: We must correctly love our fellow man. Our love

must not be contaminated with microbes, foreign elements, or ulterior motives.

Today, mankind is in need of true, genuine, Christian Orthodox love. We do not love correctly. If we did, our deeds would attest to it. Our deeds reveal the truth

about our life and our thoughts. The basic constituent known as selfless and sincere love for our brothers (not only the living but also the deceased) must not be absent from our hidden work[38]—the unseen spiritual work which every Christian must

carry out. The pain of the person who is suffering from either a physical illness or depression, and the agony of the person whom God has condemned and sentenced to jail must become our own pain. When this pain becomes part of us, God will heal us.

Cover others so God covers you! Be wronged, but do not wrong anyone. Overcome evil with virtue (cf. Rom 12:21)—this is the law of the Gospel. We should not try to avenge people who have harmed us. If we love them who love us, it is no great achievement. The tax

collectors and sinful people do the same thing (cf. Mt. 5:46-47).

Furthermore, the Gospel teaches that if we loan something to others with the intention of getting it back, we accomplish nothing. Everyone lends because it is to their advantage. You

must help without a motive, without expecting repayment. Only give. Don't think of receiving.

Give love without considering, "He did not show me love. I gave but I did not receive." In such a case, it is better not to give at all. Make the decision to give without

expecting anything in return! In this instance you are indeed helping. Christ gave love and, in return, He received wickedness from people.

A certain elder asked a younger monk, “My child, who crucified our Christ?”

“The Jews, Father.”

“No, not the Jews, my child. The envy, jealousy, and wickedness of the people crucified Him.”

Christ gave love, and the payback was jealousy and evil. He gave manna and received gall. Nonetheless, He did not protest but prayed, “Father, forgive them for

they do not know what they do" (Lk. 23:34). He was wronged, but He wronged no one. He gave love and received hatred. He praised others, and He was slandered.

This is the spirit of the Gospel. This is the truth of Christ: to sacrifice yourself for the

love of your brother, and for the love of your enemy! Then you will advance victoriously toward the brilliant light to meet Christ, our unparalleled hero of sacrifice and love.

Christ is the preeminent disciple, "Who became obedient

unto death, even death on the cross. Therefore God also highly exalted Him and gave Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue should confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Php. 2:8-11). In other words, our Christ is the foremost obedient disciple Who sacrificed Himself, and to Whom God gave the name that surpasses all other names. When He comes again to judge the world, every

being and every human upon the earth will bow down and kneel to worship Him. Everyone will bow down before Him; however, it will be unto the glory of the faithful, and unto the condemnation of them who did not believe in the true God, and who were

ensnared by the devil.

For this reason, we who have been taught the correct faith and the truth of Christ by our Orthodox Church should adhere to it by loving our fellow brothers just as Christ loves us. When we love like Christ, we will go to be with Christ. We will

enter His eternal glory in Heaven, where we will celebrate the Great Sabbath with Him and enjoy the perfect rest of the eternal Pascha,[39] which will never end unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Righteous Job

Homily 13

Forgive Me My God, Just as I Forgive Others

My beloved children,

In the parable of the ten thousand talents (vid. Mt. 18:24), our Lord Jesus Christ vividly illustrates and outlines the consequences we will suffer if we do not forgive all the transgressions others have made against

us; in other words, what will happen when we do not wholeheartedly forgive the people who have harmed us in any way.

The parable in the Gospel relates that there was a king who wanted to settle matters with his servants (i.e. with us

humans). Amongst the servants, there was a particular slave who owed his master, the king, ten thousand talents—an incalculable sum! Naturally, this slave could not pay back such an enormous debt. As a result, his master ordered that all his possessions be

sold—even his wife and children!—in order to pay off his debt. When the slave realized that he was about to lose everything and that there was no hope of ever repaying the debt, he fell at his master's feet and began to beg for forgiveness. He pleaded for more time,

and pledged to return the entire outstanding amount. This is what we all do when we owe money and are unable to pay it back. When this master witnessed his slave's humility and heard him pleading and making big promises, he pitied him, felt sorry for

him, and decided to release him from the obligation. He wrote off the entire immense debt! It was within his power; he was rich, and he had the ability to do so.

After the servant left from the royal palace, he happened to encounter one of his co-workers,

another slave, who owed him a mere one hundred dinars—a negligible and trivial amount, equivalent to approximately one hundred dollars today. He grabbed him, started to choke him, and demanded to be paid at once. His fellow servant then fell at his feet and pleaded for

mercy—using the exact same words he had voiced to the king a short while ago. The fellow servant asked him to be a little patient until he could pay back the small amount. However, not only did this servant fail to exhibit any forbearance toward his fellow man, not only

did he refuse to forgive him, not only did he deny him an extension of time, not only did he remain heartless and unsympathetic—even though the amount was insignificant, and this poor individual was in need—but he also unsparingly and

ruthlessly had him imprisoned until he returned the one hundred dollars.

When the other servants saw what this slave had done to his fellow servant, they were deeply grieved—especially when they learned that just a short

while ago his master had written off his enormous debt. They could not remain indifferent and allow such a serious matter to go unnoticed. They appeared before the king and, with pain of soul, they detailed all the regrettable events that had taken place between

their two fellow servants. Without delay, the master summoned the ungrateful servant whose debt he had dismissed, and reprimanded him: “You evil servant! You ungrateful and callous servant! I freed you from your humongous debt only because you begged

me. Shouldn't you also have shown compassion, pity, and mercy to your fellow servant? Shouldn't you also have forgiven your poor friend, just as I, your master, helped you and forgave you? I now retract my decision. Since you were so ungrateful, I revoke the settlement.

Since you cannot pay, you will be sent to jail. The guards will torture you until you pay back the amount you owe in full, until you erase your debt; that is, eternally."

The Lord concludes the parable by warning, "This is what my Heavenly Father will do

to you, the same thing will happen to all of you who do not want to forgive your fellow men, with all your heart, for all their mistakes and all the bad things they have done to you."

The Lord's warning concerning the frightful, definitive, and

irrevocable plight (i.e., eternal damnation) of every Christian who is unwilling to forgive should not only make us concerned, thoughtful, fearful, and petrified, but also give us the desire to struggle against hatred, against animosity, and against vengefulness.

What excuse will we have? How will we justify ourselves on the great day of Judgment, when all the books are opened and we are judged according to our works recorded therein? When all the trivial things of this world, which we fight over and seek to avenge,

will have ceased to exist? When we will no longer be able to correct anything? When money, property, reputation, insults, degradations, and the like will have vanished? When our transgressions will comprise an entire library of thick books, whereas

the faults of others against us will constitute only a single page or a few pages at most? How will God erase all these volumes containing our sins when we did not want to erase only one page of our brothers' faults against us?

The evil that someone

has done to us, whether it be our neighbor, our brother, our colleague, or our relative is not as significant as it seems. It is transient. Even if it lasts a lifetime, one day it will come to pass. It does not have eternal validity, power, and existence. However, the harm we

inflict upon ourselves when we do not forgive is endless. It has an eternal dimension—we will be punished endlessly!

Hence, we have to choose one of two evils: either the temporary evil that others bring upon us, or the eternal evil that we bring upon ourselves

when we do not forgive. What logical person desires his own destruction, especially when it is eternal? We know that people who suffer from psychosis harm themselves due to an underlying mental disorder. These pitiful people who are mentally

ill slit their wrists with broken glass, step on lit charcoal, commit suicide, and do many other destructive things. No rational person does these type of things. If we do not do such things because we consider them illogical, will we harm ourselves with infinitely

greater evils? Will we condemn ourselves to eternal darkness and sentence ourselves to dwell with the demons, just because we do not want to forgive the trivial harm that others have done to us? Are we willing to make such a big mistake?

Where are all the previous generations of people who left from this life once and for all without having forgiven others? What did these people gain by not forgiving? Are they not filled with bitter, unproductive regret now when there is no longer

any possibility of correction? Of course! If someone does not believe in these things, he is certainly free to do as he wishes. However, a person who claims to be an Orthodox Christian and who believes in God and the Gospel must not be found without a red

pen. What exactly does this mean?

In the official records of governmental departments, entries are crossed out using red ink. By using this red pen, each one of us who wants to be a true Orthodox Christian will cross out all his brothers'

transgressions. Every person—whether a stranger or an acquaintance, Orthodox or non-Orthodox—is our brother.

This pen will prove useful for us when we leave this life. It will serve as the key that will open the gates of

Paradise. In other words, if we do not cross out others' faults with this red pen, we will not be able to open Paradise. However, if we do cross them out, we will be able to insert this red pen into the lock, and the door of Paradise will open for us. As soon as a person says,

“May God forgive you,” and prays for his brother, Paradise opens!

The five foolish virgins knocked on the door of Paradise during the night, but in vain (vid. Mt. 25:11). They remained out in the darkness. Why? Because they had not shown

mercy, compassion, and forgiveness. They had neither oil that softens wounds, nor a red pen to cross out others' debts, in order to unlock the bridal chamber, and to open the gates of Paradise and Jerusalem above. Unfortunately, they remained locked outside

in the deep darkness—Hell! It was a frigid night without moonlight, and devoid of warmth.

The wise virgins, on the other hand, who were sound-minded and prudent entered into the bridal chamber, into Paradise, into the light of eternal life. They

possessed oil; that is, goodness and love, which do not avenge but forgive everyone and everything.

It is up to us now to appoint the location of our future home. It depends solely on us if we will enter into the bridal chamber with the wise virgins or if we will be

left out in the dark, frigid night along with the foolish virgins. Since we are still alive, since the theatrical stage of the present life has not been dismantled and the thread of life has not yet been cut, we are capable of forgiving. We can make the heroic decision to

“forgive them who trespass against us.”

When we say the Lord’s Prayer that Christ taught us, and which we recite every day, at every service, and every Sunday during the Liturgy, we ask God, “Forgive me my God, just as I forgive others.” However, when

we do not forgive, we lie to Him. We lie each time we say the prayer "Our Father" because even though we do not forgive others, we selfishly request that God forgive us. When we pray, we should first ask God to forgive everyone who has harmed us, to forgive

everyone else's sins, and then proceed to ask Him to forgive us as well because, unfortunately, we have sinned against Him much more than anyone else has against us.

The Lives of the Desert Fathers contains the following story: A

young monk once went to visit a spiritual elder, to whom he announced, “Some thief is stealing from the huts of the monks, and he also stole my possessions. He took my dry rusks and the other food I had. I have decided to press charges and report him to the

authorities so he can change for the better, so he can stop sinning, so he can pay for his mistakes. He needs to learn a good lesson!”

The spiritual elder, however, advised him, “No, my child. Don’t do it. Don’t take him to court or press charges. He is a

human being; forgive him. Pray that God enlightens him to stop stealing."

"No, Geronda.[40] He will not change! He has been doing this for a long time. If he is not punished, he will continue stealing, in which case we are not helping him."

“No, my child. You shouldn’t report him to the prosecutor. Leave the matter in God’s hands.”

The young monk, nevertheless, stubbornly continued to uphold his opinion, at which point the elder said, “Since you have made up your mind, let’s pray for things to go

well.”

Once they had both kneeled, the spiritual elder started to pray, “Our Father …” When he came to the verse, “and forgive us our trespasses,” instead of saying this, he said, “Lord, do not forgive our sins, because we also do

not forgive the trespasses of our brothers who have sinned against us."

"Father, you made a mistake," pointed out the young monk. "This isn't how the Lord's Prayer is said."

"Well, since you are going to report your brother who has sinned to

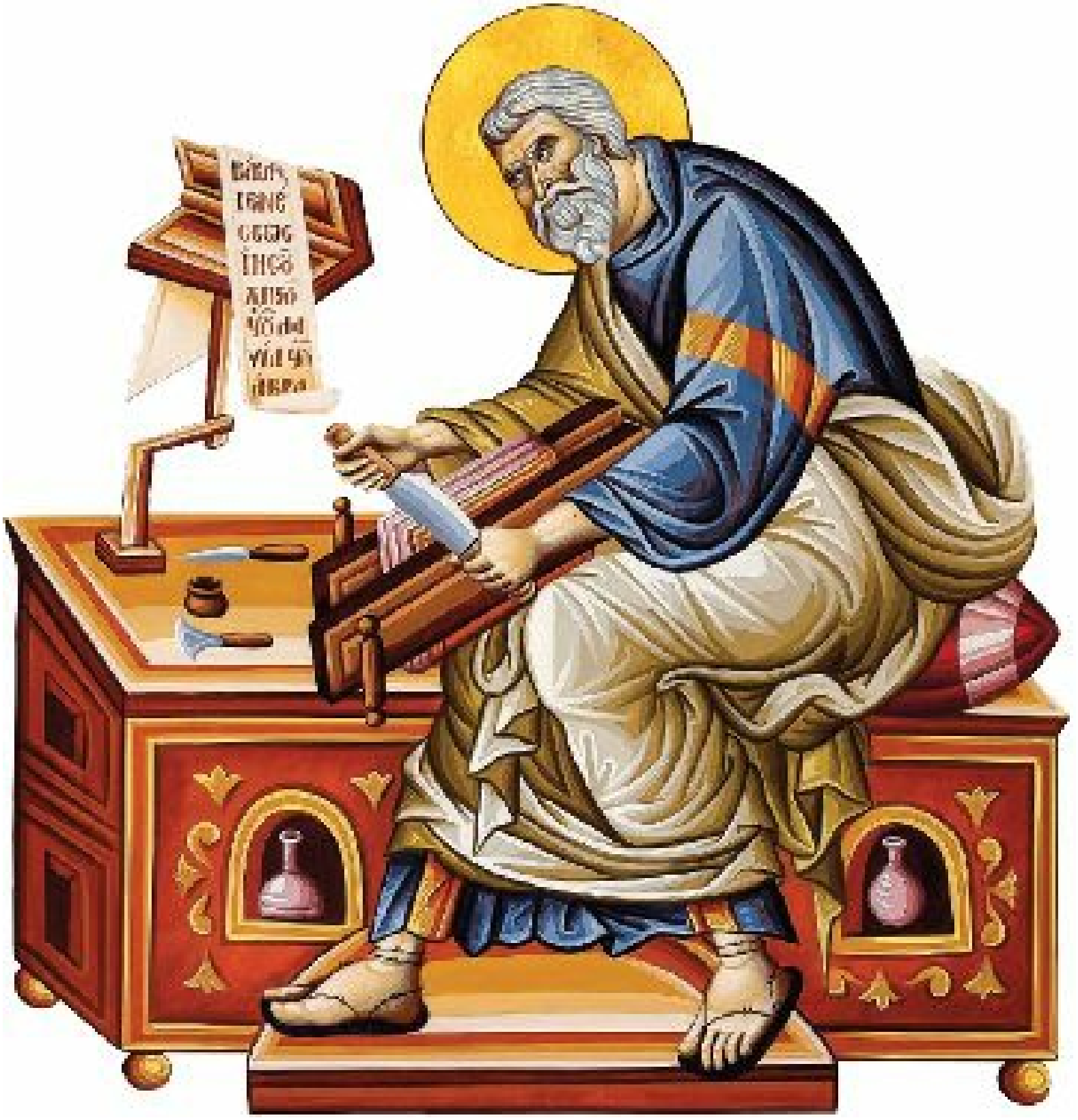
the authorities, this is how we will recite the Lord's Prayer."

The monk then realized that his way of thinking was incorrect. He asked for forgiveness, backed down, and did not report his brother who had wronged him.

This story is

exceptionally instructive and beneficial. If we grasp the essence of its meaning, it will become extremely easy for us to make every effort to forgive, and thus to acquire boldness before God in our prayers. When we unconditionally forgive every person who

has harmed us, we will have the courage and boldness to ask for our eternal forgiveness, and we will be numbered amongst the saved servants of God. Amen.



St. Matthew the Evangelist

Homily 14

The Blessing of Almsgiving

My beloved Christians, Please pray for God to

enlighten my darkness and enable me to say a few words, because without divine enlightenment no one can speak correctly. Many educated people know how to express themselves eloquently and systematically. We humble monks, on the

other hand, are unfamiliar with this "language." We call upon and ask for divine enlightenment to descend directly from above to help us speak, so that God's words enter the souls of the listeners.

Today we will speak about the foremost virtue of almsgiving. God is

merciful, compassionate, forbearing, and "He repents of evils of men" (cf. Joel 2:13). His charity, just like His nature, has no boundaries. God is unfathomable; His charity is also unfathomable and inconceivable. The fact that we still exist today

and that we have not been punished fully for our innumerable sins attests to this. God still continues to show us His mercy.

In the same way, we must also exercise mercy toward our brothers. We read the following in Holy Scriptures: “All the

day long the righteous man showeth mercy and lendeth, and his seed shall be unto blessing" (Ps. 36:26). In other words, both the merciful person who continuously gives to others as well as his descendants will have God's blessing. Because when someone gives

alms, he loans to God; and God Who borrows will return the loan as He has promised, both in this life one hundred times over, and in the next life with His Kingdom (vid. Mt. 19:29). A person gives material goods; God, however, will repay him with spiritual goods.

As described in the Holy Gospel (Mk. 12:41-44), one day our Christ was sitting outside the Temple watching people as they entered and placed their offerings into the collection box. Many wealthy people gave large sums of money. In stark contrast, one poor widow

deposited only two mites. She had nothing else to give. When Christ saw this, He declared to His disciples that she gave more than everyone else because the others had given from their surplus, whereas she gave her entire livelihood—everything she had!

Through this simple gesture, she received unfading glory, and her name was recorded in the Holy Gospel. This is precisely why we will receive many times more than what we offer to our fellow man—both in this life and in the next.

I will refer to a saint

of our Church, Saint John the Patriarch of Alexandria, who is called the "Almsgiver." While he was still a layman, this saint of God had the following vision one night. He saw an exceptionally beautiful young lady dressed as a queen, shining brighter

than the sun, and crowned with a wreath woven from olive branches, entering his bedroom and waking him up. As he wondered how this lady had the nerve to enter his house and wake him (for he was a very pure, holy young man and intended to become a monk), she

approached him and announced,

"I am the daughter of the Great King. If you come to love me and espouse me, I will lead you before the King, you will become dear to Him, and He will make you a distinguished man. For no one else has such

boldness before Him as I, who made Him descend to the earth from Heaven in order to save man."

The saint then asked her, "What is your name?"

"I am called Almsgiving," responded the lady, and she immediately disappeared.

Many years passed, and his holiness became known throughout the entire world. The Synod elevated him to the rank of bishop and subsequently appointed him Patriarch of Alexandria.

His hand was always open. He gave alms to the

poor, according to the measure of grace God had given him. Almsgiving, this unsurpassed virtue of God, accompanied him as a God-given gift. Thus, when he became a Patriarch he established hospitals, old-age homes, and institutions for the sick. The faithful, who

witnessed his God-pleasing intentions, would give to him constantly. He in turn always distributed everything to the poor, and God continuously sent him more. Very wealthy people would send him containers filled with gold, and he would

distribute everything according to God's will.

One time, someone asked for some money. Saint John instructed his deacon, "Give him fifty thousand."

The deacon thought to himself, "Fifty thousand seems too much … I will give him thirty thousand,

and I won’t say anything to the Patriarch.”

The Patriarch assumed that his deacon gave fifty thousand. Shortly thereafter, the Patriarch received a note for one hundred times the amount; that is, he received three million in return for the thirty

thousand. When he saw the amount, the Patriarch, through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, reasoned that one hundred times more than what he had given was equivalent to five million, not three million. So he summoned his deacon and asked, “How much did

you give to the poor man, deacon?”

“Forgive me, Geronda. I gave him thirty thousand instead of fifty thousand as you instructed.”

“Do you realize how much you have deprived the poor? Look at the amount on the note. If

you want to confirm the truth of the matter, we will call the lady who sent us the money."

Indeed, he called the lady, who was extremely wealthy, and asked her, "I would like you to tell us, my dear lady, how much money did you intend to send for our poor brothers

in Christ?”

“Five million.”

“Then why did you send us three?”

“As I was preparing the note, I inadvertently wrote three instead of five. I didn’t change it, however, because I concluded that it must have been God’s will for

me to give this amount."

"Do you see deacon? This is why, from now on, you will do as you are ordered!"

I will recount another event from the life of this saint.

There was a ship owner with numerous vessels. He had become

rich by venturing to foreign lands, where he would load his ships with wheat, and then return to sell it in Alexandria for a large profit. One day prior to embarking with his vessels, he went to the saint, gave him a large sum of money, and asked, “Holy man of God, take

this money and perform a Liturgy for me. Pray for everything to go well, and for my ships to return filled with commodities."

"May it be blessed."

The saint took the money and added it to the fund for the poor. Indeed, he prayed and performed a Liturgy; nonetheless,

when the ships were returning filled with goods, they all sank just as they were entering the port of Alexandria. Only the crew members on board were saved. The merchant almost lost his mind. He marched to the saint straightaway.

“Holy man of God,

what happened? Didn't you pray? I gave you so much money for the poor! You performed a Liturgy for me! Yet my ships sank right in the harbor, filled with goods!"

"I prayed, my child. It does seem odd … . I will pray again to see why God allowed this to

happen.”

When the saint prayed, God revealed to him that He had already decided to take all the crew members on board every ship as well. However, on account of the saint’s prayers, He spared the people, and none of them drowned. In

other words, God was saying, “For reasons known to Me, this is what I had decided to do. The people were going to drown, but on account of your prayers and the charity of the merchant, I let him have his crew.”

This answer satisfied the ship owner.

I will speak to you about another great saint of our church: Saint Gregory the Dialogist. This righteous man became a monk, and later, on account of his virtue and erudition, he was elected Abbot of his monastery. This saint also exercised the virtue of

almsgiving considerably. At one point, God decided to test him. He sent an angel who appeared to him as an admiral. The angel came to the monastery and declared,

"Geronda, I was shipwrecked. I lost everything along with my boat, and now I am in a

deep mess. I am appealing to you for alms."

"I will help you, my child."

He called his deacon and commanded,

"Give him a gold coin."

The deacon gave him the coin. The next day,

the angel appeared again and demanded,

"Geronda, what you gave me wasn't enough. I want another coin."

"Give him another one, deacon."

So, he gave him a second gold coin. After a few days, he returned once more.

“Geronda, I lost a great deal of money, and you gave me a negligible amount!” he demanded, as if the saint owed it to him! Nevertheless, Saint Gregory called his deacon and ordered,

“Give him another gold coin.”

“Forgive me,

Geronda, but I have no more gold. The only thing remaining is the silver platter, which your mother, the noble lady, donated to our monastery."

"Give this to him also."

The deacon gave the silver platter to the

captain, and he departed.

Many years later, the saint became the Archbishop and Pope of Rome. He continued to exercise almsgiving toward the poor from this position as well. One year he wanted to celebrate the anniversary of his consecration to the

Patriarchal throne with a special meal. He told his deacon,

"My child, find twelve hungry people and bring them here. We will provide a meal for them to celebrate the day I became Patriarch."

The deacon invited twelve people and

prepared the food. As the last pauper was seated at the table, his face, appearance, color, and characteristics would change. After the meal, everyone bid farewell to the Patriarch and received his blessing as they departed. The Patriarch, however, told the twelfth

man to stay behind, and when they were alone he entreated him: “Wait here. I want you to tell me, in God’s name: who are you?”

“I am not a man. I am an angel of God. I am the captain who requested alms from you. I took everything you had in

order to test your degree of mercy and kindness. This is why I spoke abruptly to you. However, you kindly gave me everything you had. Henceforth, I will remain invisible; but you can mention any issues of concern to me, and I will take them to the throne of

God. On account of your generous almsgiving, God deemed you worthy of becoming a Patriarch."

Just as they who are merciful will receive their reward, similarly, they who do not show mercy (that is, they who had the ability to give alms but did not) will be judged

harshly and mercilessly by God.

A very virtuous widow had a daughter, whom she loved dearly and attempted to safeguard from every evil. Unfortunately, the king became involved with this girl and led her into sin. The widowed

mother began to express her dissatisfaction to the Panagia, and asked Her to punish the king for what he did. She persistently cried with deep pain to the Panagia. One day, the Mother of God appeared to her and declared, “Listen, my child. I would have punished him for

what he did, but his right hand prevents me from doing so."

The king's right hand openly gave alms. He gave freely, and thus the Panagia could not punish him, according to the maxim, "If you show mercy, you will find mercy."

God wants you to give from what you have; He does not want more than what you have. Do you have one hand? Give with one. Do you have two hands? Give with both. Do you have two legs? Go help the sick, the disabled, the poor, with both legs and with all

your strength. Almsgiving takes place in many ways.

The Apostle Paul and Apostle Barnabas would receive alms from the Christians in Greece and take it to the widows and orphans in Jerusalem. Alms can be transmitted through others. We monks have nothing of

our own with which to help. You give charity to us and we in turn transmit it to others. The charity belongs to you, and you will receive the reward. You should know that, in this manner, everything down to the last penny goes to the poor, to widows, to people in debt,

to orphans, and to families with many children. All these people thank God and bless you from the bottom of their hearts for the help they receive.

There was a man who continuously gave alms. This person had children, whom he would always

advise to be pious, to attend church, to be charitable, etc. He would advise his wife to give alms to the poor who would come knocking on their door, and to bring home and offer a meal to any indigent people she would find at the market. One day while he was

sleeping, he saw a man who said, “Follow me.”

Indeed, he began following him. Soon, his guide unexpectedly disappeared, and he found himself alone. He looked back and saw a group of demons racing toward him. He started running as fast as he could until

he came to a house. He entered and shut the door behind him. As the demons were attempting to break down the door in order to get in and snatch him, he saw three men, who appeared to him and assured him: “Don’t be afraid. Nothing will happen to you because we

will protect you.”

When the demons saw these men, they disappeared. Gratefully, the man asked them,

“Which saints are you who came to my rescue, because I want to commemorate you and light candles to you.”

“We are the three

people from the town square," they responded. "When we had nowhere to stay, you took us to your home and gave us hospitality. Since you showed mercy on us, we came to help you in your time of need because we have been saved and are now in Heaven."

A certain saint advises, “Remember God in times of peace, so He can remember you in times of sorrow.” We must always remember God; not only when we experience sorrow, or when we are in need and in danger, but also when we enjoy good days with

peace, health, and prosperity. In this way, God will remember us in our time of difficulty. We should constantly keep almsgiving in mind: both material and spiritual alms. We should always repeat, “Thine own of thine own.” Nothing is ours. Everything belongs

to God. Has God blessed me? I have something. God did not send His blessing? I have nothing.

Saint Philaretos, who lived in the city of Amnia located in the region of Paphlagon, was very wealthy. He had a family, children, and a large home. This, however, did

not prevent him from being merciful and becoming a blessed saint of God. This saint would continuously give alms. He gave everything he had, even though his wife tried to stop him. In the end, he was left with two animals to plow his field. One day, someone came

to express his sorrow to him:

"Man of God, my animal died and now I have no way of plowing my field."

"Don't worry blessed soul. Take one of mine to plow your field."

"I will bring it back when I'm done."

“Keep it and do your work with it, blessed soul. Why bring it back? I have another one.”

So the poor man took the animal, and the saint plowed his field with the other one. His wife asked him, “Where is the other animal?”

“I gave it away.”

“Why don’t you give away this one also?” she retorted sarcastically.

“Hmm! OK. Good idea!”

So he also gave away his remaining animal. In the end he was left with nothing. His wife would scold him, “We’re going to die! We were the

richest people in the village, and now we're destitute."

The saint would respond, "I have a hidden treasure. When I uncover it, you will see how wealthy you will become."

He would speak with such assurance because he

had complete trust in God.

At some point, the emperor wanted to find a bride for his son, so he sent officials from the palace to various regions in search of young women adorned with qualities befitting of an empress, from whom he would

choose one. When these imperial regents arrived at the saint's village, they saw his mansion, and they inquired to see who lived there. The villagers told them that an elderly gentleman, who was once rich but now poor, lives there with his family. They decided to go stay at

Philaretos' house. When the saint encountered the visitors, he instructed his wife to provide them with hospitality and to prepare the last chicken that remained in their possession. The saint had exquisite granddaughters. When they came home and the imperial

representatives saw them, they decided, “Let’s add these girls to the list. They are exceptional young ladies.”

They took the girls back with them to the emperor. Ultimately, the emperor chose one of Philaretos’ granddaughters.

Philaretos was then appointed to a prestigious position in the palace, and became known as the emperor's father. From this position, he continued giving alms to the poor. He then pointed out to his wife and children, "Do you see the treasure? Do you see how

the things I gave away (which belonged to God) brought forth so many blessings? I am now called the father of the emperor. This is a great honor for me; I can ask for nothing more than this. My granddaughter is the empress, my son is a general, my other child a

nobleman …”

“Truly, holy sire,” they agreed. “You acted in a divinely inspired manner and everything turned out splendidly.”

He became a great saint who is celebrated by our Church,[41] and he started by simply giving alms. He had vast love

within his heart. He gave alms not because he wanted to get beggars off his back, nor did he apathetically throw something at them. His almsgiving was not a material gesture; rather, it was an expression that sprang from the depth of his heart.

There is another form of almsgiving as well, which is not limited to material goods. It is the one performed by people who truly love their fellow man. Such people will visit others in the hospital, they will say a few kind words to them, they will bring them a

book on God, they will console
him, they will help them during a moment of despair. When they hear someone blaspheming, they will speak to him with love and try to help him stop cursing. This is why it is written, “He who brings forth someone

worthy from an unworthy will be as My mouth" (cf. Jer. 15:19). In other words, he who helps transform a sinful man into a virtuous man with his advice, with a caring act, with his example (says Christ) is like My mouth. Just as I, Christ, advise and make people

repent with My words, so does the love for one's fellow man. Many times people who correctly use this language of love, which floods their heart, can save others from certain death of the body and soul. A comforting word, a compassionate look, even a mere

supportive presence can be a relief for someone spiritually. This almsgiving is truly invaluable.

No almsgiving, however, is more powerful than the sacrifice that takes place on the Holy Altar. Our Orthodox Church has the

Divine Liturgy, which provides benefit and solace to thousands of souls. During a single Divine Liturgy, hundreds of thousands of names can be commemorated. In this manner, they who brought the gifts receive benefit when we the priests petition for them,

“Remember O Lord …,” as do the souls who are found in the other life. Both the people who offered the Divine Liturgy as well as all the others for whom it is being offered and whom the priests commemorate receive benefit.

No one can help the

people who are found beyond the grave because according to the scriptural saying, “After death, there is no repentance” (vid. Ps. 6:4). There is no possibility for repentance because for these souls the festival has come to a close. The show has ended. How will these

souls who may possibly be found in condemnation, who find themselves in the "waiting room" of Hell, and who are being tortured in detention centers be helped now? Who will help them? We, who are still alive, will help them.

Our Orthodox Church has arranged everything so beautifully, in order to help the souls who have left from this life. The Divine Liturgy, the memorial services, the Trisagion services, almsgiving, various good deeds, the prayer rope, prayers, prostrations, the

wish, “May God rest his soul”—all these things travel upward where they meet and help these souls. Unfortunately, most people are unaware of this immense form of almsgiving. When you request a Divine Liturgy to be performed, by paying for the essentials

and for the effort of the priest—which is a negligible amount—you will help hundreds of souls who will feel relief and rest in the other world. Of course, you could have given this money to one or two poor people. It could have been used to buy them

something to wear, or something to eat; it could have helped them pay off some debt. This almsgiving is also good. However, the souls who are in a difficult situation in the other world (because they had not straightened things out with God in this life)

anxiously await for the Divine Liturgy. These imprisoned souls hope and plead for one of their descendants to become a priest so they can be commemorated down on the earth! The ascetical tradition has taught us many things concerning the benefit that ensues

from all these sacred means our Church possesses.

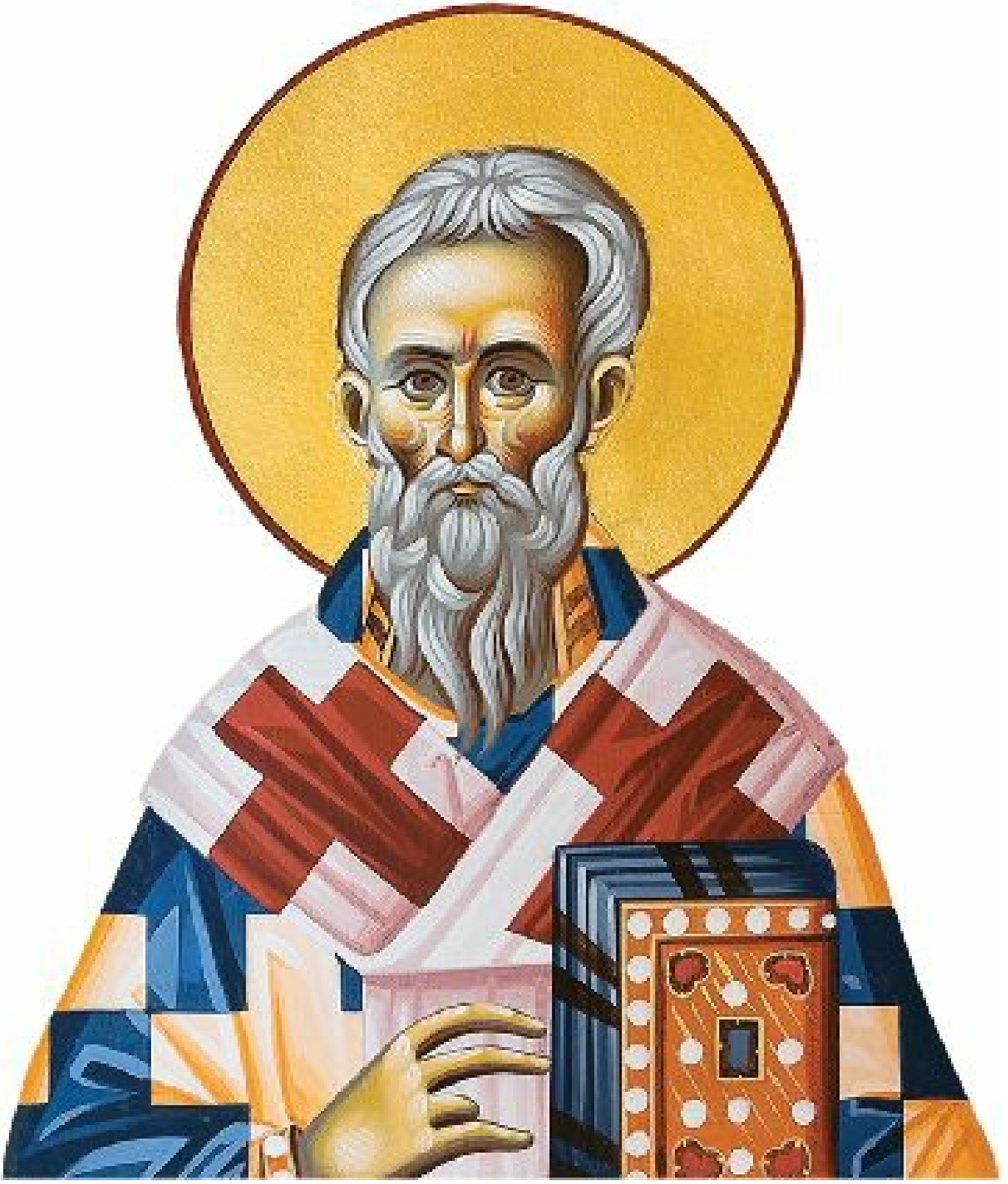
Therefore, let us pay special attention to this immensely significant virtue. Let us give alms with a cheerful face, with joy, and with pleasure. Depending on how we show mercy, God will

reciprocate His mercy on us. We must envisage the spiritual profit we will accrue. With two cents, the widow became worthy of God's Kingdom and was extolled by the Holy Gospel. This serves as a golden example for all generations. The benefit that ensues from her

example of almsgiving continuously multiplies and ascends to meet her in Heaven. So many people are edified by her example, and the benefit they receive returns with a profit to her soul.

Let us pray for God to count us worthy of exercising mercy, both

internally (with our disposition) and externally (with our actions), so that we too have the hope of finding mercy and forgiveness during the great Judgment Day of God. Amen.



St. John the Almsgiver

Homily 15

The Books of the Conscience

My blessed children, God's love and His

infinite compassion guided my footsteps once again this year to you—despite the fact that I am a totally unworthy and wretched person.

One day at my monastery, as we were reading from the writings of a certain holy Father, one particular phrase

made a big impression on me. I can honestly say that it shook me up due to the depth of its meaning. It was the following: “Woe when the books of the conscience are opened before God!” As I delved, as much as I possibly could, into the meaning and thought of the holy

Church Father who wrote it, I became extremely alarmed. What exactly did he mean by "the books of the conscience?"

Every person has a conscience, as well as a book that details his life. This book is full of pages. Every page, according to the understanding of this

great Father, represents each day that passes and that a person lives, especially a Christian. On one side, man's sins are recorded; on the other side, his good deeds. Sins committed with the mind (i.e., whatever takes place within man's imagination, mind, and

heart), as well as with bodily actions are documented. All of these sins are written on one side of the page. Concurrently, all the good deeds that are done with the soul and the body are recorded on the other side. Nothing in existence remains unnoticed by

God; all things are evident to Him. No thought, no feeling, no word escapes Him; everything is recorded in this book of life. The fact that nothing goes undetected and that everything will be examined and judged by God is a matter of grave

concern.

In essence, we are unaware of what exactly will occur when our soul departs for God. Oftentimes man's life ends at a sudden moment; and, unquestionably, during this moment, the conscience and the book of life will be opened

before the eyes of God, and man will find himself in an extraordinarily difficult position. He will have to justify—if it is possible to justify—his actions to God, Who knows everything. Nothing escapes Him! Therefore, there will be no room for excuses. A

person will be unable to excuse himself as he stands before God because his conscience will testify against the soul as it is judged before the Lord's Throne. The conscience will testify against the soul, which cannot alter the reality and the truth concerning

man's actions.

We have not fully comprehended the fact that we will be judged. When the soul departs from the body (i.e., when the soul is just about to depart or immediately after it departs), there is a preliminary hearing that takes place. The soul

finds itself before an initial court, which will, to some degree, determine the success or failure to follow when it stands trial before the great tribunal of God.

We have many examples of this event, which every person on the planet will face, both

from the tradition of the Fathers, as well as from oral tradition and personal experience. We must re-evaluate our ideas and our beliefs, and summon all the powers of our soul in preparation for our departure—this extremely serious event for every person.

Fortunately, in this life everything can be dealt with and corrected. If we are unable to do one thing, we can find another solution. However, the one-way trip we will make toward Heaven is the most serious matter for every Orthodox Christian, and as such we

must prepare appropriately with all our might because after death "there is no repentance."[42]

Our Church helps us wonderfully to understand exactly what will take place after the departure of the soul. We wholeheartedly believe

that the soul will pass through the aerial toll-houses. It will pass by the evil tax collectors, so it absolutely must have its paperwork and passport in good order; otherwise, it will get stuck and stop somewhere along the way, and from thereon it will be in a highly

dangerous position. Of course, we will come to our senses then, but it will be too late because we will not be capable of coming back to repent appropriately, to correct our paperwork, or to apply for a passport and depart once more. Man's soul does not return;

rather, it proceeds directly to its Maker. The matter is not as simple as we—and especially I—think it is.

Perhaps you have read about the death of a certain soul named Theodora. This soul looked after a holy elder. At some point, it came

time for her to leave this life. As she made her ascent toward God, she passed through the toll-houses. This is where the complications began. She had one unconfessed sin, and the angels who were accompanying, protecting, and guiding her, found themselves in

an exceptionally difficult position. They had to deal with a multitude of demons who were demanding that God judge this soul with righteousness on account of her sin; for, according to the law, she could not be declared innocent. Fortunately, as it is stated

in the narrative, the intercessions and prayers of Saint Basil, whom she had served, came to her rescue and untangled her from the webs of the demons. Subsequently, as the angels proceeded with her to Heaven, they all remarked in full agreement that if it

wasn't for Basil's prayers, this soul would have been in an extremely dangerous position, and it would have been questionable if she would have advanced upward any further.

The fact that we have not grasped the seriousness of this matter

is apparent from the life we lead. Let us use an example. Let us suppose that we had committed a felony, that we were summoned to appear in court, and that we could possibly be sentenced to death, hung, or harshly punished in some other way. Up until the day of

the trial, we would make a gigantic effort (aided by lawyers and various other means) to be found innocent. Our days would be filled with stress, anxiety, and sleepless nights, as we agonized over the outcome. As the day and hour of the trial drew nearer, our internal

state of turmoil would escalate. But what's the worse that could happen? At most, biological death; nothing more than a physiological event. Yet, we would be extremely apprehensive up until that time. This, however, does not take place when it comes to the serious issue

of liberating our soul. If the soul fails, the result will not be limited to death of the body, which does not deprive man's soul of the ability to be saved—rather, the matter takes on an eternal dimension.

We are ignorant and, therefore, cannot fully

grasp the meaning of the word "eternity." This word is defined as "life without end;" life "without sunset." Just as God's existence has no end, similarly man's soul will live without end. Consequently, in the event that we fail to attain salvation, we will live in

eternal misfortune. This misfortune will not be limited to one type of pain or to something that can be overcome or forgiven. No! Unfortunately, we will live in a frightful and horrific never-ending hell. This is why I say that we have not grasped

what will take place after death.

Through Her teachings, Her preaching, and Her mysteries, our Church enables our mind to open and comprehend this crucial matter: the only thing we are in need of—not to be condemned to Hell. We must become

attuned to our spiritual condition and regulate our life accordingly. We must give this our immediate attention because we do not know what tomorrow will bring. We do not have tomorrow at our disposal. Time is not in our possession. When we get up to leave from here,

something can possibly happen to end our life. Shortly thereafter, the book of our conscience and our life will be opened before God, and the trial will commence. Christ will turn the pages one by one and point out, “Here, you did this … on that day, you did

something else." Our conscience will respond, "Indeed, these things occurred. This is how it is. Everything is true …" And once the entire book has been read during the trial, our soul will quiver with fear like an autumn leaf in the wind, or like a live fish out of water.

This is how the soul will tremble before the awesome tribunal, as it wonders what God's decision will be. If it is positive, then we cannot fathom the depth, height, and extent of our achievement. The soul will enter into the Kingdom of God, it will

come to know Him as much as possible, and it will return to her own God and Father. Just think: God is the source of all happiness.

In the case of a negative decision, an unsuccessful outcome, and an incriminating verdict, a most dreadful

hell will unfold before this unfortunate soul. If someone were to grasp the meaning of this fully, his mind would instantly stop working. Under no circumstance can the horrific extent of Hell be understood. I will give you an example. When we have a severe toothache,

we almost lose our mind on account of the pain, and we frenziedly search for medication in order to stop it. But what is this pain? Or what is any other pain we experience, which oftentimes is severe, unbearable, and compels us to seek medical attention

immediately? What will happen, however, when the soul confronts Hell? If a person were to see a demon with his physical eyes, he would die immediately, on the spot. Yet, a condemned person will live together eternally with not only one but with millions of

demons. Is it possible for anyone to live in such a state? And yet, this is how things are.

This is why our Christ, our Love, our Savior, our God-man, Who spilt His Immaculate Blood on the Cross, cries out through His Holy Gospel, “Watch

therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming" (Mt. 25:13). No one can say that he has not heard this voice. Thus, He further declares, "Out of your own mouth I will judge you, you wicked servant" (Lk. 19:22). I will judge

you according to what you know, what you proclaim, and what you preach.

The voice of the conscience is the judge that censures us continuously. Obeying our conscience will help us mitigate its reproach considerably. How do we

obey our conscience? When it advises us to run and unload the burden of our sins and the leprosy of our soul by washing ourselves in the bath of Holy Confession, we should not disobey it. For example, we give in to sinful thoughts and our conscience advises, “You

have sinned, you have defiled yourself, you have scandalized others. Go receive therapy. Do not repeat this mistake. Run and correct yourself." If man obeys, the matter ends here; the situation improves, and the wound closes. If, however, he disobeys his conscience,

things worsen; the illness advances deeper, it infects man entirely, and finally pushes him to sin. The conscience protests: “Be careful! You’re not doing well.” If man turns a deaf ear and declines to obey (on account of the effort required), then woe to him!

Someone may say that there are people who are not bothered by their conscience. Do they lack a conscience? No. They have a conscience, but it has been debilitated. At one time, it yelled and cried out, but man paid no attention. Her voice gradually weakened and

was finally extinguished. This is why sometimes people commit unimaginable crimes, or even murder their own parents. When we hear of such atrocities, we ask ourselves, “What happened to this person? Did he become a beast?” Yes, he turned into a

beast because he strangled his conscience, and now it no longer protests.

In addition to our good conscience, however, we also have the evil conscience that leads us down demonic and sinful pathways. When someone obeys his evil

conscience, he does things that even animals do not do. When such a person is judged, he will be unable to look at God straight in the eyes. How will he face God, Whom He utterly disrespected and blasphemed? In this instance, Christ will say to the soul, “My child, I

became a human for you. I was crucified for you. I did so many things for you. I gave you your life, and many countless blessings. In return for all these good things, you blasphemed Me and ignored Me?" All this will occur when a person does not obey his good

conscience.

Mercifully, God's goodness longs to help us, and He encourages us, "Every time you fall, get up again." To fall is human, but to fall and not get up is demonic. Even if we fall seventy times seven a day, let us arise again. Many times we

find fault with others, we harbor feelings of hatred and hostility, and we do not forgive easily, ignoring God's commandment to forgive seventy times seven a day (vid. Mt. 18:22).

We sadden God terribly with a great deal of impious conduct;

nevertheless, His kindness is endless and knows no bounds. He lovingly and compassionately invites us to draw near to Him, and He graciously accepts us. Amidst the writings of the Desert Fathers, the following dialogue is recorded: Once a certain

monk went down into the city where he overheard a small child telling his father, “Daddy, there is a person who loves me, but I hate him. There is someone else who hates me, but I love him.” The monk concluded that this is a true statement. He used this opportunity to

contemplate: God loves us, and we hate Him. The devil hates us, and we love him with our actions.

The following beautiful teaching from the Fathers also comes to mind: “When a person’s soul departs from the body and the angels come to take it, after the third

day—if, of course, it reaches God and worships Him—it will receive permission for forty days to revisit all the places it lived while on the earth. The guardian angel will take the soul everywhere. As he shows it the places where it sinned and the places where it performed

virtuous deeds, he will remind it: ‘Here you committed this sin and this shameful act.’ When the soul sees the place and recalls the sinful event, it will feel ashamed and turn its face away to avoid looking at the spot where it sinned. Conversely, when it

encounters the place and location where it did something virtuous, where it repented, cried, and made prostrations, it will feel extraordinary joy.”

We should consider the things we have discussed and make a decision. Since our

Church, our sacred tradition, and the personal experiences of holy men verify that this is a perpetual truth and that nothing different can occur, we must take a long, hard look at things. We must make up our mind once and for all. Things are “black and

white." I must prepare myself. I am waiting for notification to proceed to an unknown place. I must prepare my passport now because if I do not have it ready, I will definitely have a problem when I depart from this life.

When we begin to prepare ourselves, God's

grace will help us immensely, because God is waiting with His heart wide open to take us in and fill us with heavenly joy. We have not realized what type of God we have. If we knew, we would do everything in our power not to lose Him. My elder would tell

me that there were monks in the past who would shed streams of tears (i.e., tears of joy, love, and divine eros) whenever they would hear the words "God" or "Christ." We hear and read about God, but unfortunately our eyes remain dry because God does not speak to our

heart; we have not felt Him within us. Of course, we have felt love for our fellow man in various ways, and, to some extent, we have knowledge of what it means to love another person. However, have we felt something similar with regard to the reality of God's

existence? We must struggle as much as possible to acquire this love of God.

I will make a fatherly request: Try as much as you can to focus on “the one thing needed.” Try to struggle and prepare yourselves. Let us try to erase the sins that are

recorded in the book of our life and leave only the pages containing our good deeds.

When we take one step, God will help us make one hundred steps. All that is required on our part is the desire and a small amount of forcefulness, and God

will give us many things. What did He do in the desert? There were only five loaves of bread and thousands of people. Could thousands of people possibly be satisfied with five small loaves of bread? No. Yet, He blessed the five loaves and not only did

thousands of people eat until they were full, but there also remained several baskets overflowing with leftover bread (vid. Mt. 14:19-21). The same thing will take place with us: when He blesses our small efforts, the few things we do will become many things.

What are these “many things?” Primarily, the acquisition of eternal salvation and the avoidance of eternal misfortune.

Something else we must pay special attention to is this harsh and grim subject called “hell,” because today the devil

has successfully achieved something quite clever. He ingeniously presents Hell as a condition limited to nothing more than man's conscience. He suggests that there is no existential Hell, but only hell of the conscience. In other words, I will feel bad

when I think that I saddened God. I will experience guilt within me and suffer when I remember that I committed a crime. This is how numerous people try to portray Hell. Of course, it is advantageous for the devil and people who want to “enjoy life”

to make-believe that Hell is limited to the conscience, that man will only suffer mentally, and that there is no existential hell. Such people sarcastically ask, “Are there cauldrons and flames in the other world?”

During one such

encounter with a person somewhere in Greece, I ventured to tell him that he was mistaken in his understanding and the manner in which he spoke about Hell. He responded, “Father, it is a matter of conscience and not actual existence.”

“I disagree with you,”

I answered.

"What do you believe, Father? Do you imagine that there is a Hell with fire, vats, worms, and many other such things?"

I told him the following: "When the Lord returns at the Second Coming, He will rebuke them on the left:

‘Go away from Me to the eternal fire, which has been prepared for the devil and for his angels’ (Mt. 25:41). Isn’t this correct?”

“Yes.”

“Does the devil have a conscience?”

“What do you mean?”

“Does the devil suffer

from his conscience when he commits evil deeds? He doesn't suffer," I continued to tell him. "On the contrary, he celebrates and jumps for joy when he commits evil deeds, because he opposes God. Consequently, do not imply that Hell exists in the devil's conscience,

because, in such a case, what would serve as hell for the devil?”

He failed to respond.

“Therefore, we have an existent Hell; but a spiritual one, not a physical one. The spirit has no relation to matter.”

In following, as he began to waver in his

initial convictions, I said to him, “Do you believe that the ascetical tradition of the holy Fathers is true, that they conversed and communed with God, and that they received the truth directly from Him? They had encountered through personal experience both states of

Heaven and Hell, and they expressed through numerous testimonies that Hell is not in the conscience."

The man responded, "Through the years, these stories became altered on account of the repeated printing of new editions."

I said, "With this train

of thought, should we believe that due to reprinting all the books of our Church contain mistakes?"

"No …" he replied.

I added, "We have the example of Saint Andrew the Fool for Christ. Once, when he and his disciple Epiphanios (who also

became a saint afterwards) were reading from the writings of Saint Basil the Great, Epiphanios sensed a very strong fragrance. He asked, 'Elder, where is this fragrance coming from?' The saint responded, 'The angels, my child, are censing the

words of the Holy Spirit that Saint Basil the Great wrote in this book.' Epiphanios then asked, 'You mean to say, Elder, that angels also have censers?' 'My child,' replied Saint Andrew, 'material men use physical censers; spiritual beings use spiritual

censers.’

“Consequently, a spiritual hypostasis and realm exists. Hence, we must accept the unadulterated fact that we will not suffer hell in the conscience but in a spiritual hypostasis—because the spirit cannot be tortured by the

conscience. When the resurrection of the dead takes place, the bodies that have been buried, decomposed and vanished, will be recreated in a spiritual manner. 'A natural body is sown, and a spiritual body is raised' (1 Cor. 15:44). Additionally,

people will be ‘caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air’ (1 Th. 4:17). Just as our Christ’s deified physical body became spiritual after His Resurrection, as ‘the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep’ (1 Cor. 15:20), and was not impeded by anything

material, in precisely this same manner human bodies will be made spiritual. And since man either sinned with both his soul and body, or toiled to correct the condition of both his soul and body, he will receive either rest or punishment in his soul and body."

When I had finished and we were about to part, he retorted with the following: “Neither what you believe nor what I believe is correct.”

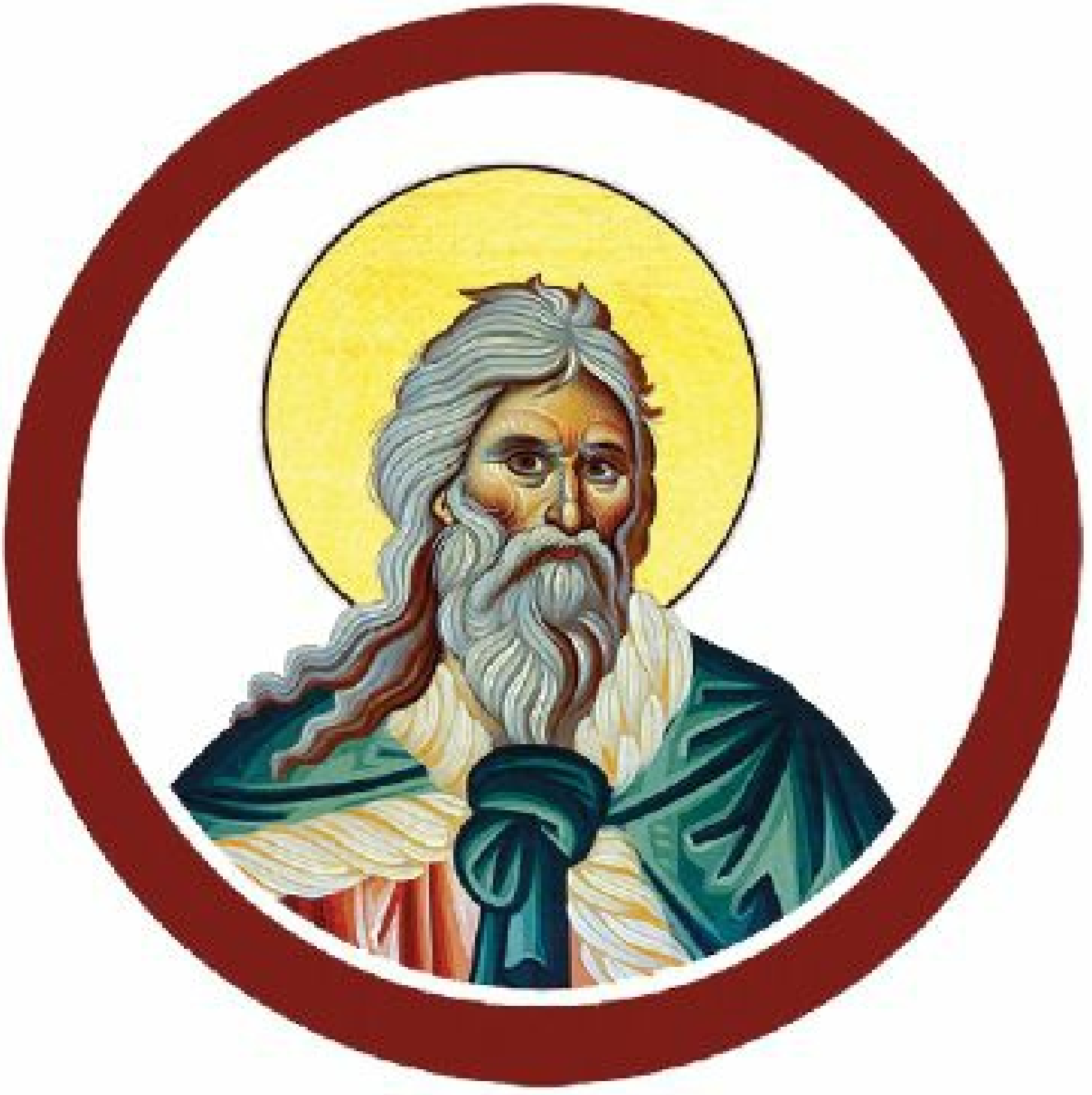
“We have nothing of our own to propose,” I concluded. “The things we said are the words of God and the Church.

Hence, we must teach correct dogma. If we preach and maintain that Hell is only in the conscience, then we will begin to live with complete indifference. We will party, we will indulge in sin, and when our conscience tries to speak up, we will neither

pay attention to it nor be bothered by it. Things, however, are not so."

I will stop here, my children. All of us—and I first, because I who am advising these things will certainly be the most accountable if I do not struggle—must now force ourselves to obey our

conscience and carry out every good thing it advises us, so that when the book of our conscience is opened before God, we are not put to shame and lose our soul, but able to live eternally with Christ. Amen.



The Prophet Elias

Homily 16

Humility Is the Cloak of the Godhead

My blessed children,

We have arrived at Holy Week and the Passion of our Lord. His life-giving Passion began in Bethany, at the village of Martha and Mary. This is from where he set out with the little donkey and His disciples to make His

entrance into Jerusalem. We witness Him Who sits upon a throne of glory simultaneously sitting upon a throne of humility. This is what our Lord wanted to teach us by mounting this humble animal—humility!

With His humility, our Christ prompted

everyone down here on the earth—even the small children—to chant, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Mt. 21:9). With His humble entrance before the multitudes of people, He moved and shook up all of Jerusalem.

“Who is this person?” exclaimed the unknowing masses. The exuberant crowd quickly broke branches from palm and bay trees and rushed to strew them on the ground over which He would soon pass.

Yet, look at how the things of this world

change so quickly! On Sunday the crowds were crying out, “Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is He who comes … .” Five days later, however, they demanded, “Away with Him, away with Him. Crucify Him!” (Jn. 19:15) This is how things are on the earth. Nothing

is stable. The world one moment extols and the very next moment condemns a person. Man is unstable; his works are unstable; his thoughts are unstable; everything that takes place in his life is utterly unstable.

The humility of our Christ is truly

remarkable! It is awesome! We witness the God-man humbly and unpretentiously seated upon a young donkey. His holy example is such a beautiful lesson for us. As we proceed to the most-sacred week of His Passion, His supreme humility stands out even

more. We see Him enduring tortures, ridicule, and slaps. We watch Him suffering the hardship of imprisonment, lifting the heavy Cross, and eventually falling to His knees from its weight. Who can fathom the fact that God on the earth was

slapped by a human hand made of clay, by the hand of man whom He fashioned with such beauty, perfection, and wisdom, whom He created to be “a god by grace” upon the earth! This very man raised his hand and struck God! If our child were to hit us,

we would rise up in protest: “You dare hit me? Your mother, your father?” But what is a mother or a father when compared to God on the earth? They are merely fellow men made of the same clay.

This is where the beauty of Christ lies: in

His humility! If He were not humble, He would not be God. He is not a commanding ruler with haughtiness. Not at all! His glory is His humility. The greatest glory a person can have on the earth is acquired when he rises above everyone and becomes the leader of a

nation, such as a king. No greater glory can be acquired once a person reaches the top and assumes the supreme position. Even so, when does the glory of a king increase? When he is seen humbling himself, visiting villages, meeting with the poor and

disabled, eating with the average citizens—then his honor and esteem increase dramatically! His kindness, humility, and love for his people elevate him evermore in the conscience of his citizens. Thus, his glory increases.

Christ, our infinite

God, abandoned His Divine glory for us. From the moment of His birth up until the time of His crucifixion, He gave us a profound and seismic lesson in humility. His entire life upon the earth was full of difficulties.[43] This is why all the trials that God allows us to be

confronted with have no purpose other than to help us humble our mindset. A certain saint informs us that, “tribulations will not cease unless man humbles himself.”

We assert that God is love. However, when trials and tribulations arise, we wonder, “Where

is His love?" What will you think the moment God takes your child, takes your husband, or leaves your child crippled? During this extremely painful time, the devil will attempt to persuade you that God is unjust. You witness an event that seems contrary

to love. In such an instance, you will be shaken if you do not possess within you the correct understanding of God's love.

God's decisions resemble an abyss. If you believe that God is a Father, you must also admit that a father never

desires something bad for his child. The fact that He hit you, that He smacked you, that He did not fulfill your wish is something that your biological father does as well; yet, you are certain that he truly loves you. Since your biological father takes these measures, what can you

say about God the Father Who is entirely love? If He did not love you, He would not have been crucified for you. No one else ever became man, suffered the torments of human life, and sacrificed himself with such disdain and humility.

Imagine yourself

being thrown on the ground, crucified, and pierced with iron nails! When we receive an injection with a fine needle, we feel pain. How would we be able to bear the torments valiantly, if our feet and hands were nailed, and we were then hung on the cross

suspended by these nails? We would lose our mind! Yet our God, Who could have annihilated everything with a single glance, humbly endured all these things. God did this for whom? For Himself? No! He did it for me! If He did not love me, would He have done

this? He did this because He loves me! Can such a love ever be unjust? Never! Is God perhaps like me, who is good one day and bad the next? God always remains the same; God never changes. How can I accuse God of acting unjustly since I do not know His judgments?

Will I examine God? Do I know God's mind? Will I become His advisor or judge? Can I possibly analyze His decisions and actions? With such reasoning you can silence the devil, and through the temptation and trial you will become knowledgeable and

learned. When the devil comes and speaks to you unjustly about God in an attempt to tear down God within you (because when he takes God down, he has taken down your whole life as well), turn away from him with this knowledge and with humility.

How did Christ overcome the devil? With humility. What defeated man? His egotism. Due to his ego, man believed the devil who told him that if he ate from the fruit which God forbid him to eat, he would become a god and be capable of discerning between good

and evil. The fruit was appealing to the eyes, sweet to the taste, and powerfully attractive to Eve. Moreover, the words of the devil, “you will become God,” fooled her into contemplating, “How nice it will be to become a god in minutes! All I have to do is eat!” But

after she ate the fruit, she was shut out of Paradise. This was the deception.

The same thing happens to us. When we listen to the devil's messages (i.e., to the evil thoughts of pride and egotism he imparts to us), we start to boil. During such moments, we err

with our judgments, with our tongue, with our hands, and with so many other things.

This is why Christ taught us humility: this virtue that restrains all evil. Humility does not allow man to stray; it does not allow him to sin greatly. The higher

someone climbs, the more dangerous and terrible his fall will be. The wise Solomon states, “It is better to fall from a great height than from the tongue” (vid. WSir. 20:18). It is better to fall from a great height and break your arms and legs than to fall from the

tongue, which oftentimes causes greater injuries. What evil doesn't come forth from the tongue, and what problems doesn't the tongue create! The prophet David reached the point of stating that the tongue is like a grave (vid. Ps. 5:9). How repulsive it is, indeed,

when a grave is opened and bones, maggots, and other foul-smelling and decomposing elements are unearthed! It is the same with a tongue that resembles a grave full of wickedness. When it is set loose, all this disgusting filth is released and externalized

—something that is quite repulsive to sensible people. Conversely, humility adorns a Christian.

Our Christ, the source of all wisdom, appeared to the world as an uneducated man who labored at a lowly profession. He did not

choose scholars to be His disciples; rather, He opted for the fishermen. He chose men who barely knew how to speak their native tongue, and He made them wise, linguists, prophets, miracle workers, Spirit-bearers. He turned them into Apostles who cast

their nets and caught the entire world with their words. Ironically, today we have to attend colleges and universities in order to understand the New Testament that was written by the illiterate Apostles.

Our Christ's entire appearance upon the earth

was humble, void of honor and glory. He confronted the devil head-on and annihilated him with His humility. The devil assumed that he was dealing with a prophet, similar to the ones he had met and harmed in the past. He accomplished nothing, however,

because he was expecting to meet earth but instead found himself before Heaven. When did he realize this? When Christ descended into Hades.

Saint Isaac the Syrian teaches us that true, genuine humility that results from experience is "the cloak of the

Divinity," and that whoever is clothed with true humility is clothed with God. He then continues to explain that if God had not draped His Divinity with the humble human nature, the earth would not have been able to accept the "Divine Fire" on its surface or

within its depths. He concealed His Divinity within the human nature. He placed the "fire" within a veil and, in this manner, He was able to descend to the earth and converse with man without the earth being consumed by the fire of His Divinity. How could

God possibly speak with man and not simultaneously burn him? "Who will see My face and live?" (cf. Ex. 33:20) God asked Moses when he ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments.

Thus, He humbled Himself and concealed

His Divinity within the lowly human nature. He engaged in the monumental battle with the devil, He gave His own blood, and He walked away with man as a trophy, "leading him as a sacrifice before God the Father" (cf. 1 Pt. 3:18). In other words, He offered

man to God the Father like a prize of victory. When a ruler conquers a city in time of war, he enters the city and takes hold of the most beautiful and precious objects within it. Henceforth, they become his possessions. In the same manner, after defeating

the devil, Christ took hold of man, for whom He fought in the battle, and He led him to God the Father as a trophy of victory. This is why the person who has humility defeats the devil.

Do you know why we —and I first—are defeated by the devil?

Because we possess egotism. Our egotism allows the devil to thrash us with evil thoughts, passions, and weaknesses. We are not dressed with the divine garment in order to distance the devil away from us. We do not have the fire of the Divinity (i.e., genuine

humility) in our soul and heart, and thus the devil approaches us with his venomous claws and his disgusting presence, and he turns us upside down.

Certain people, due to ignorance of course, claim that they do not have egotism. However, when we become angry,

we act like madmen. If someone was to take a picture of us at that moment and show it to us once we have calmed down, we would respond in surprise, "Am *I* this person?" Or if a tape recorder was to record everything we spew from our mouth when we are

overcome by anger and rage, and we were to listen to it once we calmed down, we would feel ashamed. This is how we act when we wretched people ally with egotism. Egotism is extremely filthy. It makes a mockery of us, and we don’t even realize it. It

humiliates us when we quarrel, when we curse, when we condemn, when we say and do unspeakably shameful things. When others see us acting this way, they feel sorry for us—even though we sometimes foolishly boast as if we have accomplished

something great. We wind up in this mad state from terrible and ugly egotism.

Christ came to the earth to save us; to provide us with medicine so we can be healed; to arm us with the weapons of light in order to battle and to kill the enemy before he kills us. All the

weapons are in our hands. Prayer is one weapon; tears are another; humility is another. Love, reading the Holy Scriptures, receiving Holy Communion, and attending Church are yet more. See how many weapons we possess! Don’t we have the ability

to use rebuttal?[44] Don't we have watchfulness? Isn't this a marvelous weapon against each and every evil thought? By carefully and vigilantly watching over our internal being, in order to avoid contracting pathogens and to prevent

the enemy from entering, we are able to kill the enemy with the weapon of prayer and preserve the peace of God within us.

God always remains at His lofty height. He created tens of thousands of galaxies with His word alone. Everything belongs to Him, and nothing is

impossible for God. Nevertheless, He descended to this earth in order to save man and to show him that He is not a ruler, but a compassionate Father Who forgives and truly loves man. If He did not love man, He would not have sacrificed Himself for him.

During every Divine Liturgy upon the Holy Altar, upon the millions of Holy Altars throughout the world, whenever a priest serves the Liturgy, Christ descends, He humbles Himself, He sacrifices Himself, and He consecrates the holy gifts. Who is so obedient?

God is! When the priest performs the Divine Liturgy and reads the required prayers, the Holy Spirit will descend and transubstantiate the bread into the Body of Christ and the wine into the Blood of Christ. Behold God's humility as it is repeated daily!

Do you want to see another example of His infinite humility? Try to estimate in a single moment how many curses are hurled by people toward God and the Panagia. Consider how many blasphemies are uttered year after year! How does God react?

Does He immediately raise His sword to chop off people's heads? No! We, however, would do so. In His position, we "very important people" in glory and honor (i.e., in pride and egotism), would immediately raise our sword and behead anyone who spoke badly about us.

God, however, hears everything and yet continuously tolerates these innumerable vulgar remarks because He is within man and man is within God.

God is an absolute Spirit. He is present everywhere and fills all things. God through His

uncreated energies is everywhere, in all people and throughout the entire creation. God is like the sun that disperses its light everywhere. Do you see the extent of God's forbearance?

Can egotism ever be associated with long-suffering? No! When

egotism exists, impatience and the desire for revenge follow right behind. The humble person will respond, “It’s all right. May God forgive him. Even though he spoke badly about me, even though he wronged me, I will conquer evil with good. It’s OK if he

cursed me; I will speak to him politely and honor him with my words. He treated me unfairly, but I will help him." This is how a humble man will reply. An egotist, on the other hand, will immediately stand up to justify himself and to seek revenge. Does God

act this way? No! Therefore, God with all His glory is humble, whereas we poor people who are made of clay rise up and demand self-justification.

Consequently, we act irrationally and end up being perpetually guilty with respect to God's

humility.

Soon we will depart from this life and go to Christ. When Christ asks us, “What did you endure for Me?” how will we respond? “I didn’t do any ascesis because it wasn’t easy and I didn’t have the strength.” Christ will then ask, “Did you at least

accept the involuntary ascesis?" What is involuntary ascesis? Do we thank God when we become ill, when others make fun of us, when others humiliate us, when others desert us, when we suffer a crippling disease? Are we patient during such trials and

difficulties? Do we consider these things necessary on account of our sins? This is referred to as involuntary ascesis.

We can say to God, "My God, I didn't do any voluntary ascesis; however, I patiently endured the involuntary ascesis that You sent me

in Your wisdom. I was ill, I became widowed, I was ridiculed, I was wronged, and I endured everything for Your love." Then Christ will respond, "Very well. What did I do for you? Look at My hands and feet: they have holes. Look at My side: it is pierced. Look at My

head: it is full of blood from the thorns. Look at My forehead: it is covered in sweat. Look at My back: it is full of scourges and lashes. My entire body and soul suffered for you. I also accept what you did for Me."

When, however, we

offer nothing voluntarily and also lose our patience during involuntary trials, we will leave this life with an empty suitcase and with nothing to offer Christ. What will we say to Him? Instead of diamonds and other precious items, our luggage will be full of

hay, rusted cans, garbage, and rags. These will be our works. Christ will ask, “You mean to tell Me, this is what you accomplished all these years I gave you? This is what you did? This is what you brought Me? How many things did I do for you?” At that

moment, our conscience will attest that this is indeed the truth. It will serve as a witness of condemnation when it confirms and agrees that this is how things are. Then, every man is silenced; he closes his mouth and has nothing to answer in his defense.

This is what took place with a certain person who went to meet God. As soon as he looked at Christ, the soul realized that He knew everything. Christ judged him and made His decision with His glance alone. It was neither necessary for Christ to

open His mouth nor for the person to give an account. With a mere glance from Christ, everything was finished. It is not necessary for Christ to speak—first, because He knows everything; second, because we all have within us a witness of

condemnation, the internal judge: our conscience. There is no room for excuses; we will rightfully be condemned.

For this reason, we must draw near to the light and happiness of God through prayer, a virtuous life, and humility. Furthermore,

when our conscience criticizes us for various flaws, we must attempt—at all cost—to correct ourselves, so that she is unable to accuse us of anything and so we may thus be saved. Amen. So be it!

Homily 17

Glory to Thy Compassion, O Lord

My blessed children,

Our God is love, and "he who remains in love abides in God and God in him" (1 Jn. 4:16).

Any Christian who does not have the love of God in his heart does not have the life of Christ in his soul. God's merciful

and monumental dispensation, (the fact that the Logos[45] descended from Heaven, that He became man, that He assumed flesh, that He approached us and dwelt amongst us) is nothing other than the manifestation of His infinite love and

compassion. God's love is what protects us and provides us with everything that is necessary.

Unfortunately, we humans sin and sadden God. We often act disrespectfully; nevertheless, His compassion is limitless,

and He forgives everything. All of us—and I first—have saddened this immense heart of God, which is referred to as “love for man.” For this reason, we must henceforth live carefully and no longer offer Him the bitterness of sin.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son described in the Sacred Gospel is the most perfect example possible of God the Father's love for sinful man. We see the prodigal son, who represents every sinful person on the earth, asking his father for his entitled portion of the

inheritance. Of course, his decision to take his share and distance himself from his paternal home, fatherly love, and filial protection was extremely unwise and imprudent. He departed believing that he, on his own, would be capable of caring for himself; however, he paid

a heavy price for his foolishness. As our Holy Gospel describes, this prodigal son squandered his entire fortune by living an extremely sinful life.

Sin, however, gives rise to death: “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). The payment of sin

is death of the soul, although oftentimes it becomes the cause of physical death as well.

After the prodigal son squandered his entire inheritance, he was reduced to herding pigs and living off dry husks. Something similar happens to man. When a

Christian receives the wealth of God's grace through holy baptism but later severs all ties with God the Father and alienates himself from this grace, he ends up becoming a vessel of the devil and sin, living "in prodigality" far from God and constantly wallowing

in one sin after another.

Nonetheless, as the parable states, the prodigal son came to his senses at some point and realized his mistake. Evidently, up until then he was not completely sane, he was devoid of logic, understanding, and prudence. He came to his

senses, recounts our Christ, and he thought to himself, “How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!” (Lk. 15:17). “I am perishing here in a foreign land. It is better for me to go back. I won’t ask my father to refer to

me as his son any longer because I am unworthy of this title. I will ask him to group me with his employees and servants. They enjoy such a good life there; it will be enough for me to become like one of them. I don't have the courage to ask him to take me back as a

son because I have lost the dignity of sonship. I squandered my father's inheritance; now it is enough for me to return and become one of his servants."

These and many other similar thoughts were racing through his mind when he decided to begin

his journey home. Even before he set out, his father was standing outside the house, waiting for him lovingly with an open embrace. This is how much God is ready to accept every sinful person. The prodigal son started his journey homeward. He took the

“straight path,” the road leading to salvation, and he arrived at his family home. His father immediately accepted him. He hugged him, kissed him, and wept over him. The prodigal son was also crying and began to stammer, “Father, I have sinned against

heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son" (Lk. 15:21). How did the father respond? "Forget everything! No matter what you've done! The fact that you have returned is enough for me. It is sufficient for me that you came home. You

were dead and you came back to life; you were lost and have been found. This suffices. Forget about your sins, your mistakes, and the fortune you wasted. Forget everything!”

At once, he ordered that his son be bathed. After he was washed, he

dressed him with the brilliant garment of sonship, and placed a ring on his finger. All of a sudden everything changed. He was a grubby shepherd of swine, but as soon as he returned, he instantly became a child of God, a son of the King, and was adorned in

brilliance. He wasn't expecting such a thing. His father showed so much compassion and love. "What vanity I had, and how much was I deceived," thought the prodigal son, "when I was living away from my father."

Finally, his father

commanded that the fatted calf be slaughtered, and that a great celebration commence on account of his prodigal son's return. The festivities began. Everything was shining in the father's palace. Overjoyed and elated, the father was delighting in

his son's return. The son was awestruck before this unexpected miracle of his salvation.

This is a small sample of the actual love that God has for sinful man. Our Heavenly Father is always ready—from the moment a person repents, asks for forgiveness, and

seeks to return to a pure way of life—to forgive and forget everything. All that is required is for man to come to his senses; that is, to acknowledge his mistakes, to humble his mindset, to acknowledge that he has erred, and to ask for forgiveness. Then God will assure him,

“Forget everything, my child. It is enough for Me that you returned. I forgive everything; it is enough that you came back to Me again.”

However, man’s enemy (the devil) comes and—with his immense slyness, deceit, and craftiness—whispers the

following into the ears of the sinner: “God will not forgive you; you are extremely sinful. You have committed many crimes. A severe punishment and hell is in store for you. Don’t even think of approaching God. You are unworthy of raising your eyes to pray

and ask for forgiveness. God is angry! …" He suggests these and many other such things.

The sinful person should not believe any of this. The instant a child returns from a life of sin and prodigality, even if he had previously cursed, pushed, or hit his parents,

his mother and father will immediately embrace him, forgive him, and overlook all his insolent behavior. It suffices that their child came home full of remorsefulness.

If a mother who is endowed with a loving human heart—which is incomparably smaller

than the love of God—shows such forgiveness and compassion to her child who had strayed away when he returns, how much more forgiveness and mercy will God bestow, Who possesses infinite love and compassion! We must completely ignore

the whispers of the rebellious devil. He is unable to learn humility; this is why he will forever remain distanced from God. As soon as humility nestles into a person's mindset, simultaneously his return begins. Egotism and pride are the evils that separate us from

God.

If we contemplate the parable of the prodigal son with our heart and mind, we will constantly harvest repentance and return, and we will enrich our soul with the love of God. We will perceive that our God is a tender Father Who possesses

love without measure. We cannot go wrong with this type of love. No matter how much the devil whispers to us that God will not forgive us because we committed many crimes during our lifetime, when we see the face of our Heavenly Father mirrored in the

parable of the prodigal son, all the demonic thoughts will immediately be dispersed.

There were two monks, whom the devil led astray; thus, they ended up abandoning the desert and monasticism, and they became laymen again. God, however, did

not overlook their efforts, their asceticism, and their devotion. Some time later, He enlightened them to repent. They went back to their skete, they confessed their sins, and the spiritual fathers gave them a penance to live separately in solitude for one year. They were to

meet with no other people, but only to pray. A small amount of food would be taken to them daily. After their one-year penance was over, they would be forgiven for their sin and would receive Holy Communion. At the end of the year, they were

brought out of solitude. One of the monks had a bright face; he had slightly sunken cheeks, but looked pleasant. Conversely, the other monk looked extremely enfeebled. They had been given the same food; they had committed the same sins. Nevertheless, there

was a distinctly noticeable difference on their faces.

They asked the first monk, “Father, what were you thinking while confined to your room?”

“I was thinking how much I saddened God, and that I have condemned my soul to

Hell. I thought of what is in store for me, and that I will dwell with the demons eternally. As I spent my days down in Hell with this contemplation, I began to lose my strength, I was exceedingly disheartened, and from all the profuse tears I withered away."

Then they proceeded to ask the other monk, "How did you spend your time of repentance in isolation, Father?"

"I thought of God's love. I brought to mind where I was initially, how the devil led me astray, how God's hand pulled me out of sin and brought

me back to the beautiful monastic life that I had previously experienced. I compared this initial way of life to my subsequent state. Furthermore, I thought of how God, through His Crucifixion and His Immaculate Blood, brought me here, that He will allow me to

receive Holy Communion after a year, and that I will live here with the fathers as I did before. All these thoughts gave me joy and happiness, which prevented me from becoming withered and despondent."

The fathers then concluded that both of

them had repented equally: one person by using the memory of Hell; the other person, the love of God. Both of them repented correctly and successfully re-entered monastic life.

We see here that when we repent and cry on account of our sins, when

we think of Hell, the associated tortures that exist down there, the possibility of eternal separation from God, the angels, and the light, all these heal us and help us attain communion with God. God in turn generously sends us His love. Similarly, when

man considers the tremendous love of God the Father Who helped him return without loathing his filth, his debauchery, his blasphemies, his inequities, and Who delivered him from these evils and brought him to the pure life of repentance

and return, how is it possible for this person not to rejoice and not to cry out of love for God!

This second way of looking at things is just as blessed as the first. When man acknowledges his own sinfulness and simultaneously comprehends God's love,

man is saved—he gets back on the road, back on the highway, that ends at the Golden Gate of the Kingdom of Heaven.

We should always remember that our Christ, in order for us to live close to Him, in order for us to live united with Him, granted us the

“fatted calf;” that is, His Holy Body and His Immaculate Blood! If the blood of goats and bulls, along with the ashes of a heifer, as mentioned in the Old Testament, cleansed them “who had been defiled,” how much more so will the Blood of Christ cleanse us from

every sin! “For if the blood of bulls and of goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your

conscience from dead works …?” (Heb. 9:13-14). If, therefore, the blood of animal sacrifices in the Old Testament were capable of redeeming the sins of people, states the Apostle Paul, the Blood of the God-man, the Blood of our crucified Christ, the

Blood of the Lamb of God, cleanses, sanctifies, and saves sinful man! As we eat from these Holy Mysteries, we also become gods "by grace." "Ye are gods and all sons of the Most-High" (Ps. 81:6). We become children of God by grace and communion.

We must be cautious of how we approach the chalice to receive Holy Communion. The Immaculate Body and Blood of Christ are Holy and All-Holy. What am I? Who am I? I am a sinful person, a wretch, and a criminal. If I approach with repentance, having

confessed, and with the permission of my spiritual father, then I partake of the Body and Blood of Christ; I partake of eternal life. Through Holy Communion, I become a communicant of the Kingdom of God: "heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ" (Rom.

8:17). Co-inheritor of Christ means that a Christian, by partaking of Holy Communion, will dwell with Christ at the Second Coming. Such a Christian who partakes of the Holy Mysteries with repentance will be wherever Christ is.

Unfortunately, we

transgress God's commandments despite all the love He shows us. His love is so vast, yet we reciprocate so little. He has forgiven all our sins, and He will continue to forgive us until the end of our life. What can we give back to the Lord in return for His immense

love? We should bring His love to mind constantly and live within this love. This love will give us the strength to deal with life successfully.

Furthermore, when we are tested by the love of God, let us at least thank Him by repeating the

phrase of Job the athlete: “As it seemed good to the Lord, so also it came to pass. Blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). Every trial we face is a practical expression of God’s love. No matter how you look at it, it is not in the least void of God’s love and

protection. Infinite are the people and innumerable are the Christians who attribute either their own or their entire family's return to a certain trial in their life.

When someone is close friends with a powerful ruler who loves him and is willing to

protect him, help him, and come to his defense when necessary, he feels a tremendous sense of confidence and security. Moreover, he takes great pleasure and boasts in his close connection with the ruler. If someone thinks in this manner when he knows an important ruler,

how much more so must we Christians give our hearts entirely to Christ, when we absolutely, wholeheartedly, and unshakably believe that Christ is our God, that He was crucified for us, that He is the Mediator between man and God, that He is the God-man,

that He loves us with perfect love! No one loves us as Christ does. Proof of this is that He notifies the angelic ranks to begin celebrating when a person repents: “There will be great joy in heaven over one sinner who repents” (Lk. 15:7).

The angels have

inexpressible joy when they hear and are informed that a certain big sinner down on the earth has repented and returned to the path of God. With this thought alone we can understand how much love they possess for us sinners! Think of the joy

experienced by the angel who was appointed during Holy Baptism to look after this repentant sinner. The angel never abandoned him, even though he may have stood at a distance from him on account of sin! The guardian angel of man's soul always prays to and

beseeches God.

In the Holy Gospel, we read about the unproductive fig tree. In this parable, the farmer says to the servant: “I come every year, but I find no crop. Cut it down so it doesn’t take up this space, and let’s plant something else.”

The servant, however, replies: “Leave it for one more year. I will fertilize it, till the soil, and water it. Perhaps it will produce fruit.”

“I will wait,” responded the master (cf. Lk. 13:6-9).

Our guardian angel acts in the same manner.

Oftentimes death's sickle draws near to cut down a sinful person on account of his sins, but his angel petitions: "Lord, allow this soul to stay a little longer. Please give him some more time; perhaps he will repent and return. Perhaps he will acknowledge his mistake

and come back to You."

Thus, God waits. This reveals the guardian angel's tremendous love for man. Even when man still reeks of sin, the angel follows behind him.

A holy elder was once traveling from the desert to a city to take care of a certain spiritual matter.

On his way, he noticed a young man seated and crying outside a front yard. He realized that it was an angel of God. He approached him and said, “It seems to me that you’re not a human but an angel of God. Since you are an angel, why are you crying?”

“Indeed, I am not a human as you correctly realized. I am a guardian angel of a certain soul, of a certain Christian. I am sitting and crying because this person who has been entrusted to me is sinning this very moment inside this house. I am waiting for him until he comes

out, beseeching God to forgive him and to enlighten him not to repeat this sin again."

The saint marveled at the angel's love for man. This is why the innumerable multitude of angels celebrate when a sinful person returns.

Do you see what kind

of God we have? Do you see what kind of a Christ we have, and what great hope there exists in this love that God and the angels have for us? This is why we must never despair or lose our courage. Rather, we should boldly proceed to God's Throne of Grace,

seeking mercy and forgiveness—not only for ourselves, but also for every person on the earth. All people are children of God; they are creations of God, and Christ was crucified for every one of them.

We have the sheep who have gone astray.

They must also return, and they are in need of prayer. Who will pray for these souls? They who have received God's mercy, they who have the knowledge of God, and they who have been graced with the love of God will pray for them. We have an obligation

before God to pray for every person.

Not only does every transgression of God's commandments constitute sin; it is also a sin when we do not pray for other people because we do not fulfill our obligation to love every soul. Even though Christ loves all

people and was crucified for these people, we pray only for ourselves and for our relatives, and we usually forget about everyone else. Nevertheless, all these people have not been forgotten by the Cross of Christ. We should kneel, raise our hands, and offer

fervent prayer with all our heart on behalf of every single human being. We do not know what result our prayers will have. There are people who repent even though no one has ever spoken to them about repentance and return. Some event in their life makes them

return. This was the result of someone's prayer that was heard. This is why we must pray and express our love in this manner. We must—even to a small degree—emulate and reflect God's love toward our fellow man.

Let us render honor and glory to God's

compassion.

Glory to Thy compassion, O Lord, which You stretched out infinitely and abundantly upon the earth. With Your glory and forgiveness, You covered the sins of humanity! Amen.

Archangel Michael

Homily 18

Until the End of the Age, Saints Will Continue to Exist

Our Christ thundered and continuously thunders from His Holy Gospel: “If any one of My servants, who is baptized in My name and remains faithful, confesses Me before men, if any brave athlete competes in the contest of My name and

proclaims that I am the True God Who came in the flesh, Who was crucified and resurrected for the love of man, I will also confess him before the angels of My Father, before the angels in Heaven" (cf. Lk. 12:8). Blessed and fortunate is the man, the Orthodox

Christian, who will confess the Divinity of our Christ before tyrants, atheists, materialists, and rationalists.

Our Church believes and proclaims that until the end times, until the end of this present age, the Saints will not cease to exist; rather, She will

continue giving rise to holy children worthy of crowns and glory.

As we see, today there are no hermits living ascetically in the desert; no one lives with the austerity endured by countless hermits of the past. Since there are no such ascetics and

strugglers today, how can we be assured that the Church will not be deprived of saints up until the end of the age?

Who will the saints of the final years be, now that even we as monastics no longer lead an ascetical way of life or possess virtues like the

hermits and monks of past generations? Even though this is the case, we must wholeheartedly believe that during the end times, which we are now entering and will journey through, the holy people will be they who will confess our Jesus and who will proclaim and

thunder that our Christ is the true God Who became incarnate for man. With this confession, they will be crowned and become holy.

The martyrs made their good confession during the first years of Christianity. There were numerous miracles taking

place at the time. Christians would perform miracles with ease. Holiness was widespread. The faithful were replete with the Holy Spirit. Virtue was cultivated abundantly. Today, conversely, we have no virtue. Nowadays, we make minimal effort, and

the virtue we attain is trivial. Darkness, deception, and destruction are present everywhere. Sin and darkness prevail in all levels of human society. This darkness of unbelief and immorality will continue to escalate, multiply, and worsen as we proceed toward the

close of this age. Thus, even the slightest virtue, even a slight amount of spiritual struggle will have immense value in the eyes of God.

In past times, one Christian would help another spiritually. Conversely, today one person pushes another

toward sin and spiritual deterioration. All you hear people talking about and discussing amongst themselves is sin of one form or another. Needless to say, carnal sin is the dominating topic of discussion that reigns in every sector of society. The devil has managed

with his wickedness, cunningness, coercion, and skill to prevail upon the thoughts and desires of people.

"The fool has said in his heart: there is no God" (Ps. 13:1). Who declared that "there is no God?" The "fool!" Foolish is the person whose mind does

not function properly; who cannot manage his thoughts correctly; who does not make sound choices. Such a person erroneously concludes and proclaims that God does not exist. The most absurd thing that a person can say is that “God does not exist.” God is within

man, within his soul; however, man has become estranged from God. He has no relation or contact with God. The devil and sin have erected a wall of division that now separates them.

Today, the number one warfare—let us refer to it as warfare, even

though it can more accurately be deemed an epidemic—is the carnal mindset. This sinful impulse initially seeks to taint our thoughts and the five senses (of both our body and soul), and subsequently to defile us, leaving no room for the Holy Spirit to dwell

within us. Furthermore, it tries to prevent us from receiving God's blessing and render us incapable of accepting the fire of God's love, which has the power to rejuvenate us, revive us, and strengthen us to confront all the difficulties that lie in store for us.

We must try to purify ourselves both externally and internally, especially our mind—because all the evil that takes place in our heart and with our body originates from the mind. Evil is externalized through the bodily members once the mind and intellect have

succumbed to sin. Bees do not land on flowers lacking nectar. Rather, they fly to flora containing nectar, which they convert into sweet honey. Similarly, the Holy Spirit races around the earth in search of a pure mind and serene intellect, where He comes

to rest and bears fruit. Therefore, in order for us to receive the Holy Spirit, Who will strengthen us and render us worthy of confessing the Divinity of our Christ, we must first struggle to purify ourselves spiritually and physically, and then be crowned.

In addition to the martyrs of the first centuries, we have an entire cloud of new-martyrs: the martyrs who made their confession during the Turkish occupation.[46] Most of the new-martyrs had renounced their faith and denied Christ due to

various reasons, circumstances, and causes. However, in following, they regretted their mistake, they confessed Christ, they were martyred, they were crowned, and today they are saints in Heaven. Their example is magnificent and

powerful. Whoever reads the lives of the new-martyrs is totally set ablaze with the desire to suffer martyrdom also.

I will make reference to one of the new-martyrs named John. He confessed our Christ before the Turkish ruler with these words: “Christ

is my God, whereas Mohamed is a deceiver and false prophet." Shortly after the ruler tortured him and locked him in jail, Holy Week arrived. The new-martyr John entreated the Lord to be executed on Holy Pascha. His prayer was heard, and on the day of

Holy Pascha the ruler called him to stand trial a second time.

The soldiers took him and led him to the courthouse. As he entered the courtroom, his soul was entirely ablaze, full of love, and filled with Paschal resurrection. As he came forward he

joyfully chanted, “Christ is risen …” The Turks were yelling at him, “Are you crazy? Have you lost your mind? What are you saying?” However, he continued chanting, “Christ is risen!” Finally, after he was sentenced to have his head cut off, the soldiers took him and led

him to the town square where he would become a public spectacle. Our Christians were praying for this martyr and entreating God to help him be crowned victoriously and thus put the devil and the Muslims to shame. Indeed, this is what happened.

As he headed for martyrdom, the new-martyr was rushing to meet the sword in order to depart for Heaven as quickly as possible. On account of his eagerness and joy, he stepped on both Turkish soldiers who were escorting him. “Where do you think

you're going, you infidel?" they asked him. "To a festival?"

"If you only knew where I'm going!" replied the martyr.

Finally, when he arrived at the place of his execution, he stirred up the executioner,

"Let's see what type

of a man you are! Do you think you can cut my head off with one swipe?”

What bravery and beauty! This provoked the executioner, and he responded arrogantly, “You bet I can …”

He struck him with his sword, and his head rolled away on the first

blow.

We see that this cloud of martyrs was full of zeal—and of course during a time period that is not too far before our days, even though they had the same desire and love for martyrdom as the first Christian martyrs—and they were crowned

with the same glory as the great-martyrs of old. The same God Who existed then exists today, and He will remain the same in the future. The Holy Spirit is also the same. Just as He strengthened them, He will strengthen us. If God (out of love and compassion) decides

to have mercy on us, concedes, and deems us worthy of making the good confession before impious atheists, we may also be blessed with martyrdom. Our works are worthless, our sins are numerous, our passions are uncontrollable beasts —only a martyrdom and a

confession of the faith can save us. The saints of the final years will be confessors: they will be the ones who confess, as we stated in the beginning of our talk, that our Christ is the true God Who came in the flesh.

Imagine how beautiful it will be for a Christian

of the present age to bear witness to the Divinity of Christ and the Trinity before impious people, to become a confessor, and to have his soul taken by the angels who will begin chanting heavenly anthems of victory and praise!

All of us wonder:

“How will we be able to endure martyrdom? We cannot even tolerate a toothache!” I am the first who cannot. If a needle or another sharp object pricks us, we immediately feel pain, we cry, we look for alcohol and other medical supplies. As soon as we feel even the

slightest pain, we reach for medicine and run to our doctor. Things will not be so in the case of martyrdom. All that will exist then are the horrific tortures! What will happen then? Desire for martyrdom exists; however, the spirit is willing but the flesh is

weak (cf. Mt. 26:41). The body resists, objects, and does not want to endure pain and suffering.

I will give you an example of a young boy who was martyred many centuries ago, and you will see how a person endures martyrdom and how "with the temptation

there also comes a way of escape" (1 Cor. 10:13). When God calls a person to martyrdom, the former coward who feared pain becomes a lion. How does this take place? Listen.

While a certain ruler was preparing for war, he resorted (as was common in those days) to an oracle

in order to be informed by the demons whether or not he would be victorious in the battle. The demon attending to the oracle responded: “I will give you an answer only if you remove from your capital city the relics of Hieromartyr Babylas and the three youths.” The

ruler immediately ordered the Christians to move the holy relics of these saints outside the city limits, in order to enable the devil to give him an answer —"yes or no"— concerning the war.

Our Christians (elderly, adults, and children), took the holy

relics and proceeded with them outside the city, chanting the following psalms and hymns: “The idols of the nations are of silver and gold, the works of the hands of men … they have eyes but shall not see, they have ears but shall not hear...Let those who make them become

like unto them" (Ps. 113:12). When the ruler heard their words, he took exception to this and exclaimed: "They are ridiculing us with their songs!" He immediately sent soldiers to apprehend some of the people.

An eighteen-year-old boy named Theodoros

was amongst the faithful who were detained by the soldiers. They hung Theodoros on a post, they stripped off his clothes and began to lacerate his body with steel hand rakes containing razor-sharp prongs. As they cut grooves into his flesh, his blood began flowing like

a river. For as long as this boy remained alive, hanging from the post, they gouged his entire body and rubbed vinegar and salt into his open wounds. In the end, he resembled a slaughtered animal. From morning till dusk the soldiers took turns, one after another,

until he was on the brink of death. When they realized that there was no life remaining in him and that he would die, they brought him down off the pole and gave him to his family. The relatives took the boy home and began to give him palliative care. At some point the

boy opened his eyes, at which time his parents began asking: “Our son, Theodoros, how were you able to endure this? How did you manage not to complain or cry out?”

“I will tell you. After they hung me on the post and the soldiers began to slash my body with those

sharp steel rakes, I started to feel excruciating pain that pierced my very heart. At that moment I thought to myself, 'Wretched Theodoros, patiently endure this pain so you can avoid the eternal pain of Hell.' As I focused on this notion of Hell, I decided with

determination, ‘I will be patient.’ As soon as I made this decision, I saw three beautiful young men approaching. One was holding a basin filled with heavenly myrrh. The other was holding small towels in his hands. When they came and stood next to me, the third one would

take one of the cloths, dip it in the fragrant liquid and cover my face with it. Due to the fragrance of this holy myrrh, I no longer felt any pain or suffering. I was living in a celestial state and felt such blissfulness that it would have been better if they never took me down

from the wooden pole. As soon as they took me down, the angels departed. I would have been glad if they continued gashing me for years."

Here we see how God intervenes in a supernatural way during martyrdom. God is He

Who initiates martyrdom and Who also takes it to completion. If a divine fire does not set ablaze the heart and soul of a confessor, it is humanly impossible for a person to confess Christ and to endure martyrdom courageously and triumphantly. This is why

when our thoughts tell us, "How will you endure martyrdom? You can't even endure the slightest discomfort," we must firmly believe that if God decides for us to suffer martyrdom, Christ Himself will come to help us. He will send us the Holy Spirit, He will send

the heavenly fire to set us ablaze and give us the strength to suffer martyrdom.

The unfolding world events and the prophecies of our Church indicate that the difficult days are approaching. It's possible that we are presently on the outer perimeter and,

in following, we will start spiraling toward the inner circles until we reach the center. What we must be concerned with in essence is “the one thing needed.” We should prepare ourselves spiritually each day, we should prepare our soul, we should purify ourselves from every sin,

we should repent for the sins we have committed or for whatever we will do henceforth, so that we are found well prepared for the end of our life. We do not know if, even in our days, we will find ourselves before martyrdom.

Parents must

diligently teach the faith to their children. They should implant and transmit their own Orthodox faith to their little ones. They should expand on the topic of God, so their children can believe in Him—because children today are shaken by the spirit of atheism,

which is prevalent everywhere. If our children do not possess strong faith in their soul, how will they be able to confront the Antichrist in the future? How will they confront the numerous existing antichrists, like the Jehovah's Witnesses and all the other awful

heresies if they do not possess the pure faith in Christ? Of course, it would be very beneficial if certain talks took place at some point in the future to discuss topics such as faith in God, and proof of God's existence, so that the children acquire a solid foundation

—because without a foundation, every house crumbles. They must acquire a secure and unshakable foundation of faith within themselves, so that, later, they can be in a position to enter the contest and confess the Divinity of our Christ.

We all must make an

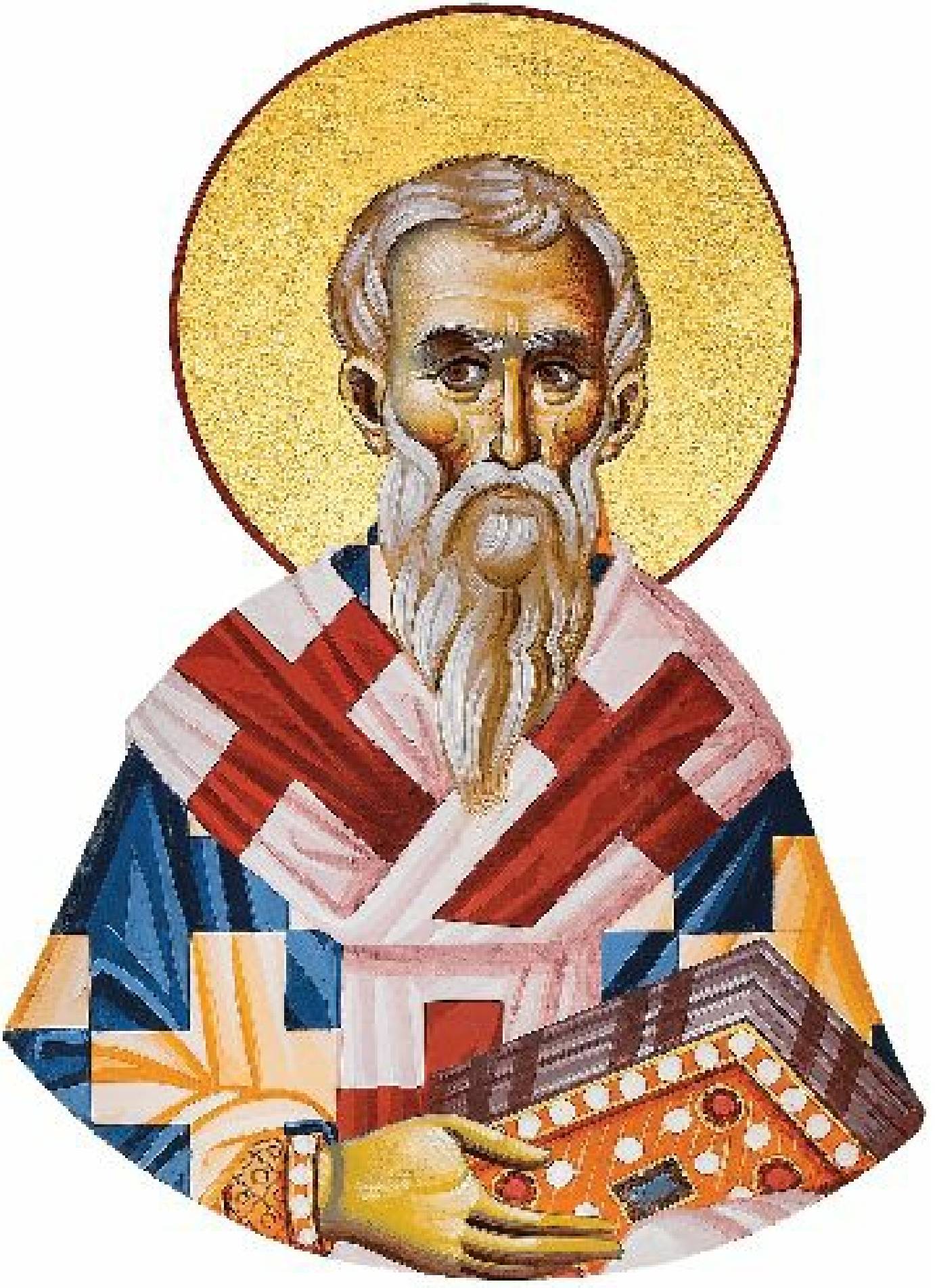
effort to help the children, because I discern that, despite their characteristic good nature and simplicity, they are weak in matters of the faith. This is because they did not find what we found growing up in our homeland. Here they found deficient spiritual

nourishment and consequently it is quite natural for them to be weak. It is essential that we strengthen and vitalize them in the faith. This lesson, of course, will take place sometime in the future; may God help us to do this because it will be of great benefit to

the children.

As you are aware, our small mission has come to an end and we are preparing to depart. I ask that you pray for us, so we can meet again next year, console each other, and help as much as possible. We, on our end, pray for you a great deal.

We ask that you pray for us in the same way, so that we have the health and strength to continue coming and providing this minimal aid.



St. Ignatios the God-Bearer

Homily 19

She Who Is Wider than the Heavens

My beloved children,

Today we will say a few words in honor of our Panagia, whom our Orthodox Church glorifies and elevates above the Cherubim and Seraphim, and whom, conversely, heretics lower to a degradable level.

When our Panagia met with Saint Elizabeth, the mother of the Honorable Forerunner, amongst other things, she also foretold the following: “From henceforth, all the generations will call me blessed” (Lk. 1:48). In other words, from this

point forward all the generations of people who will believe in the Lord will bless me because God the Father gave me the honor of becoming the Mother of His Son. What an extraordinary honor for a woman!

In our days there is much talk concerning

equality of men and women. However, the struggles for this equality and the so-called feminist movement have appeared quite late. For twenty centuries now, Christianity has resolved the problem. How? It abolished discrimination. It honored the female

gender with value equal to that of man. Furthermore, it honored a particular woman with acclaim that no man ever had, has, or will have. This woman is the Most-Holy Theotokos.

Christianity, and the Church, does not use gender, social status,

education, material wealth, or intelligence as criteria to rate and assess people. It grades and evaluates them using a single criterion: holiness. In the eyes of God there is no male and female. There are only people who are sinful and repentant, impious and

pious, holy and holier.

During the feast day of the Dormition of the Theotokos, we revere the holiest person, the holiest woman: our Panagia. Our Panagia not only remained incorrupt during her lifetime; she remained incorrupt during death as well. The birth of

her Son did not corrupt her virginity, sin did not corrupt her soul, and death did not corrupt her body. Just as the body of Christ remained incorrupt when He died upon the Cross, similarly, the body of our Panagia remained incorrupt when she passed away.

Since in the Orthodox Church we have and venerate incorrupt bodies of saints, how much more so was it natural for the God-bearing body of the Mother of our Lord and God to remain incorrupt! Moreover, would it ever be possible for her body to remain on the earth?

No! It was transferred to Heaven. During her entrance into the temple of Solomon, our Panagia entered the Holy of Holies, whereas with her Dormition, she entered with her immaculate, exquisite soul and her glorious, incorrupt body into the Holy of Holies in

Heaven.

If for other people physical death results in decomposition of the body, for our Panagia it became a life-giving event. Of course, during the universal resurrection at the Second Coming all the faithful will receive incorrupt bodies;

however, for our Panagia, this transformation took place three days after her burial. Her departure toward the Lord was the beginning of a second, eternal state of being for both her soul and body. It was not possible for death to detain her whom had been “entirely united with

God.”

We experience profound reverence for our Panagia during the feast day of her Dormition. Who exalted her? Her Son, God, and Savior of the world. If Saint John the Baptist was the Forerunner of Christ’s advent to the earth, Christ

was the Forerunner for the Theotokos' journey to Heaven. Christ was first to conquer death, and with His incorrupt and Divine body He ascended to Heaven and became the Forerunner for our Panagia. Christ was the first born amongst the dead; He ascended to

prepare the way for the faithful to pass into Heaven. This is how the Apostle Paul expresses it: “Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a High Priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 6:20).

The Panagia received

in Her womb the God-man, the Son and Word of God, Who assumed His human nature from the Virgin Mary and united it with His Divine nature in one hypostasis. Christ brought her into Heaven fully intact: both with her soul and her body. When our Panagia received

Christ the God-man in her womb, she became wider than the heavens. We see her depicted in certain icons as "the Platytera."[47] She received Christ, she carried Him in her womb, and she gave birth to Him. Now, Christ

receives the holy soul of His Mother the Theotokos in His arms, in the palm of His hands. Saint John of Damaskos marvels, "How does the Word of God, Who became her son by concession on account of ineffable compassion, now minister to His most-holy and godly Mother

and receive her blessed and sacred soul into His Almighty hands!" Our Panagia attended to and cared for our Jesus Christ as long as He was a child. Now the Son receives His Mother as a Queen in Heaven: "The queen stood on thy right hand, clothed in vesture wrought with

gold, and arrayed in diverse colors" (Ps. 44:9-10).

The Apostles honored our Panagia. Instantly they all assembled in Jerusalem to bury the body of the Theotokos and Mother of their Teacher. Holy Tradition tells us: "Apostles from

the ends of the earth are here assembled together … .” Let no one doubt how it was possible for the Apostles to come together from the ends of the earth. The Apostles are the eagles of the Spirit. How did they span the entire globe? Who gave them winged feet to

race all over the earth? God's power did. This same power now takes the Apostles from the ends of the earth and brings them to Jerusalem. He who gave a chariot of fire to the prophet Elias the Thesbite to ascend high above (vid. 4 Kings 2:11), He who took the Apostle

Philip from Gaza and brought him to Azotus (vid. Acts 8:39-40), this same God also sent a special vehicle for each Apostle—not like the ones that we use, but a luminous cloud—that transported each one of them to Jerusalem.

The Apostles paid

tribute to the Mother of the Lord, and on the third day they were filled with amazement and wonder when they discovered that her body was missing from her grave in Gethsemane. The angels in Heaven also honored our Panagia. They received her at the time of

her Dormition, accompanied her, and took her to visit all the heavenly dwellings and mansions. Awestruck, they beheld her ascend higher than the Cherubim and Seraphim, according to the megalynarion:[48] “More honorable than the Cherubim, and more

glorious beyond compare than the Seraphim." This was a surprise for the angels! They witnessed the first human body ascending into Heaven and being glorified in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Just as the angels were awestruck during the Ascension of our Christ

when they witnessed God and man (united in one God-human hypostasis) ascending—whereas when He descended to become incarnate He was only God—similarly they now are astounded with the conveyance of the Theotokos into Heaven. Up until that time, they

were accustomed to receiving only sanctified souls who had been liberated and saved. Now, however, during the Dormition of the Theotokos they received a body as well. It was the immaculate body of the Theotokos, which “the grave and death were not

able to detain." Just as we marveled when we saw the first astronaut rocketing high above the earth and walking on the moon, similarly, the angels were dumbfounded when they saw a human being setting foot in the Holy of Holies of Heaven. Our Panagia is the first

female “astronaut” to soar above even the angels.

Finally, the Panagia is honored by all faithful and pious Orthodox Christians, but especially by the Greek people more than any other ethnicity. It dedicates most of its churches to the Panagia. Most of our monasteries

have the Panagia as their protectress. Most candles are lit before byzantine icons of the Panagia (byzantine iconography expresses the dogmatic beliefs of our Church). During the difficult moments of life, people who suffer call upon our Panagia. Rivers of tears

are poured out before Her holy icons. The Panagia is deeply rooted within the conscience of our Orthodox people.

My blessed Christians, I have shown you who honored and who continues to honor the Panagia. However, there are also the people who

do not honor our Panagia, but disrespect her personage.

There is an event that took place during her Dormition, as you are probably aware, which is mentioned by Saint John of Damaskos. As you know, Saint John of Damaskos was a great

ascetic. The cave he dwelled in is found within the monastery of Saint Savva the Sanctified in Palestine. Saint John recounts that as the Apostles and the faithful of the first church were proceeding to bury the body of our Panagia (which was laying upon a

bier), a certain Jew suddenly leapt forward to grab the body and throw it to the ground. However, he was unsuccessful. His hands were severed invisibly by an angel of God, and they remained stuck to the body of the Theotokos. This event and the excruciating pain

brought the Jew to repentance, and he asked for forgiveness from our Panagia. Immediately another miracle occurred. His hands were restored to their original position.

Only one person acted disrespectfully toward our Panagia then. Today, many people act with

impiety. Have you heard of the Jehovah's Witnesses? These antichrists do not accept the Theotokos. They speak about some Mary, as if they are referring to some young gal who lives down the street. They belittle her to such an extent!

The heretical Protestants on the one hand do accept the term "Theotokos;" however, they do not accept the ever-virginity of the Theotokos. This is another form of blasphemy. They throw the heavenly diamond into the muck of sensual

desire and carnal relations, according to their blasphemous beliefs.

Furthermore, we hear of and meet certain delusional Orthodox Christians who claim that they supposedly see our Panagia who instructs them to write letters and epistles. We are referring

to the “enlightened ones.” They are the fools who place their own nonsense into the mouth of the Panagia.

We must also cry and lament for something else. The mouths of hundreds of thousands of Greeks open daily like Hades and blaspheme the

Immaculate Daughter of Nazareth. I will make a quick estimate because I am familiar with what takes place. Perhaps two out of every ten men do not blaspheme Panagia and Christ; eight definitely do. Hence, taking into account the millions of men (not

including women), you can calculate how many people act with impiety toward our Panagia and Mother of our God.

Don't you also see something else? Women dishonor our Panagia with their provocative attire and nudity during the summer months. On the

one hand, they venerate the icon of the modest Theotokos; on the other hand, they scandalize, destroy, and become the cause of condemnation with their provocativeness.

Unfortunately, such women do not even realize that this is a sin

that must be confessed.

Our Panagia is saddened by all this impiety of the people. All we faithful, let us repent, let us honor our Panagia correctly, and let us exclaim the following with pain, desire, and love for both ourselves and our fellow man: “Most-Holy

Theotokos, save us, your children!” Amen.

She Who is Wider than the Heavens

Homily 20

Pain and Suffering in Our Life

The path of life is full of pain, tears, thorns, and nails. Crosses are planted everywhere; uncertainty and sorrow are found all over. Every step is accompanied by a Gethsemane; every uphill road leads to a Golgotha. A spear pierces every

person at each moment. If we could wring the earth like a sponge, it would drip blood and tears.

"As for man, his days are as the grass; he shall blossom forth as a flower of the field," remarks the Psalmist (Ps. 102:15).

Beautiful things are accompanied by pain;

nevertheless, pain in turn leads to joy. Roses produce thorns, and thorns produce roses. The rainbow usually appears after a storm. Before the sky clears up, a downpour must first take place.

Man, enlightened by Christian faith and philosophy, possesses the

ability to discern and examine things much deeper than what is apparent on the surface. Within pain, one can detect joy and hope, just as Christ's triumph sprang forth from His painful Passion and Crucifixion.

The most impressive

statues have received the greatest number of strikes. Great souls owe their grandeur to the heavy blows of pain. Precious works of gold first pass through the fire of the furnace.

Pain shakes the very foundations of man's existence. Pain is like a

fiery furnace that burns and scorches; it resembles a downpour and a storm. The wise Solomon states, “My soul and the ocean never remain calm.” There are times when trials come in succession one after another—sometimes even all at once! The cross becomes

very heavy then. Our apprehension peaks. The soul is ready to bend under the unbearable weight. Everything seems dark—pitch black! Darkness and dead-ends fill the horizon. Saint Gregory the Theologian remarks, “The good moments have passed;

difficulties lie ahead visibly and tauntingly. The journey takes place in the darkness of night. There is no light anywhere, and it seems as if Christ is asleep."

Life's sorrows comprise nails and knives. These nails and knives mercilessly pierce

and rip open human hearts. They set hearts ablaze, paralyze them, and destroy them.

The only thing that remains during such moments is the cry that is addressed to God in the form of supplication: “Have mercy on me, O Lord … my soul has been

greatly distressed … I have grown tired with my sighs … my heart has become like melted wax … Have mercy on me, O Lord, because I am troubled … my life has passed in sorrow, and my years with sighs … I have been forgotten like a person who has died …

my tears have become food for me day and night … why are you sad, my soul, and why do you make me unsettled?" (Ps. 22:14; 31:9; 42:3; 42:5).

Man is the king of creation; however, his crown is woven with thorns. Man's journey at times sounds like a joyful

song and symphony; other times, most of the time, it sounds like an unceasingly sorrowful and mournful lamentation.

Pain constitutes a great and eternal enigma. It has been the topic of study for philosophers, social workers,

psychiatrists, and many others. Even so, Christian faith and the law of God provide the most authoritative answer.

The answer is twofold. Theologically it is the consequence of the fall, just like all the other evils. It is the result of man's incorrect use of

freedom. It is the fruit of disobedience. Ethically, it is an opportunity and a means to acquire virtue and attain perfection.

"I will always honor God," pledges Saint Gregory the Theologian, "no matter how many difficulties He allows to confront me. For me, pain

constitutes a medicine of salvation." Saint Basil the Great advises, "Since God is preparing the crown of His Kingdom for us, let illness be a cause for virtue."

Saint John Chrysostom observes, "Sorrows bring us closer to God. When we

consider the eternal benefits of sorrows, we will not be distressed."

The holy Apostle Paul who experienced such persecution and pain, who was full of the "wounds of Christ," teaches that God allows man to suffer adversities "for our profit, that we may be partakers

of His holiness" (Heb. 12:10).

God has thousands of ways to reveal His love for you. Christ can transform your misfortune into a melodious doxology. "Your sorrow will be turned into joy," promises the Lord (Jn. 16:20).

Depending on the battle, there will be an analogous victory. You will not find inexpensive items in the shop of Heaven. Moments of pain and sacrifice are actually a time of blessings. Behind every cross there follows a resurrection. What if we feel pain and

cry ceaselessly at present? “Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:17)

The person who endures pain becomes an outstanding athlete of life who achieves glorious

victories. He will be compensated with eternal awards: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for those who love Him” (1 Cor. 2:9).

Whoever faces and deals with pain using the

prism of eternity is already a victor. He is a select individual who, through his faith in God, has attained joy, has tasted the goodness of the Lord, and has become a prospective recipient of heavenly crowns. Such a person can repeat the victorious cry of the

Apostle Paul: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that day” (2 Tim. 4:7-8).

With such spiritual

dimensions before us, the ability to rise above pain and to transform it into liberating joy becomes a reality. It is a change owed to the power of God. It is a renewal—albeit illogical for people who use reason alone—and a natural outcome of Christian faith. This

renewal remains an unsolved puzzle for the atheistic individual and wishful thinking for the earthly person; however, for the faithful person it is an extraordinary miracle brought about by God.

Enduring pain with a spiritual outlook leads to

the solution of this great problem. It leads from darkness to light.

Hence, we are obligated to welcome pain, whenever it visits us, as a blessing from God. Wheat is compressed and decays in the earth, but this is when it proliferates and

flourishes. Blessed and bountiful is the harvest of pain. God's blessing abounds within the field of tears. This blessing is experienced by all who, with the gift of discernment, genuinely believe. God's blessing and mercy will be upon all who have passed

through the furnace of various sufferings, with the aid of divine power and understanding. The eternal, immortal, and blissful rest in God awaits them. Amen

ΙΝΒΙ
ΙΣ
ΧΣ

The Crucifixion

Homily 21

Repentance: Joyful Mourning

My beloved brothers, God commands us

through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah, “Wash yourselves, and make yourselves clean. Put away the evils from your souls before My eyes. Cease from your evils. Learn to do good” (Isa. 1:16-17).

Repentance presupposes sin. Whoever

has not sinned does not need to repent. All of us, and I first, sense our sinfulness. Sin is an injury and a wound. It injures the soul, wounds our conscience, and induces severe pain. It injures the body of Christ: the Church to which we as members belong. Sin

serves as a nail in the body of Christ and in His recrucifixion.

Who has not been wounded by sin?

Who has not sinned with words, thoughts, or actions?

Who has not been struck right in the chest by the pangs of the

conscience? Whoever alleges that he has not sinned has uttered the biggest lie possible. All they who suffer from ignorance and lack self-knowledge lie and claim that they have no sins.

The great and irrefutable truth is that, without exception, we

have all been wounded by the arrows of sin. Nonetheless, if sin has wounded us, repentance is our medicine.

Repentance! What a magnificent and blessed gift from God to man! Do you realize what it means to obligate God, at any hour and moment you

desire, to wipe clean your criminal record? Imagine that there is a certain criminal with a heavy criminal record. Imagine that this person, who has committed an endless series of crimes, suddenly makes an appeal that compels the judge to pardon him and expunge

his offenses. This appeal is repentance. God confirms this truth through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah: “Come now, and let us reason together, says the Lord. And even if your sins are like crimson, I shall make them white like snow” (Isa. 1:18).

Many Christians have the reverent desire to be baptized in the Jordan River. However, no matter how many times we enter the Jordan River, and no matter how many bottles of holy water we drink, if we do not repent we will not be saved. The Jordan River is close by;

it is next to us. It flows in the Church. It is sweet repentance and confession. If we wash ourselves with repentance, all our sins are extinguished.

The bath of repentance constitutes a second baptism. One does not unknowingly undergo

this divine baptismal bath, which is termed repentance, as is the case with infant baptism; rather, it takes place consciously and decisively. I wash myself with the intention of not becoming dirty again, regardless of whether or not I accomplish this. I

wash myself fully determined not to defile the robe of my soul again.

Repentance is a response to God's mercy; more precisely, God's mercy is the response to man's repentance. After Christ's advent and arrival, repentance is not merely regret and

confession of sins: it is remission, forgiveness, effacement, and complete obliteration of sin.

Repentance is a lamentation that leads to joy. It is joyful mourning. Repentance is sowing that takes place with tears, and subsequently leads to a liberating harvest. We cry

for many things here in the world; however, our tears cannot bring back the things we have lost. We have lost valuable items. No matter how much we cry, we do not regain them. For example, we lose our family members when they die. No matter how many

tears we shed, they will not come back to life.

Sin deprives our conscience of peace. When we repent and cry for our sins, these are the only tears that restore the peace we have lost. When we sin, we lose the most precious of objects: our soul. The soul dies when

it sins. If we cry when a friend or a loved one dies physically, we must cry a thousand times more when our soul (or another person's soul) dies. If we cry for our sins, our soul will be resurrected; whereas, no matter how much we cry over the casket of a deceased

family member, their body will not come back to life again.

We must cry for our sins like David who would soak his pillow with his tears (cf. Ps. 6:7).

Let us weep like the harlot whose tears became more fragrant than myrrh as they wet

the feet of Christ (cf. Lk. 7:38).

Let us cry as the Apostle Peter did after he denied his Teacher (cf. Mt. 26:75).

Let us cry as the Apostle Paul did whenever he remembered that he had persecuted the Church of Christ.

Let us cry like the great sinners who subsequently became holy.

Let us cry not only for our own sins, but also for the sins of others.

Has someone else sinned? Do not judge him; that is, do not criticize and condemn

him. Cry for his mistake as if it was your own fall. We are "each other's members" (cf. Rom. 12:5). The other person is a member of and belongs to the same body as you: he is a member of the body of Christ. You should cry for this person just as the Apostle Paul

would cry for others: “I did not cease to admonish everyone night and day with tears” (Acts 20:31). Cry for your child who transgressed; for the Christian who slipped and fell.

Sin is like fire. The droplets that extinguish this fire are the droplets

of repentance. If the house next door to you catches fire, won't you run to help put out the fire? If you remain indifferent, the fire will spread to your home as well. Similarly, you cannot remain indifferent when someone else is being burned by the

inferno of sin. Shed tears in order to put out the fire. If you remain indifferent, you will also be at fault; you will also have a sin. If, however, you not only remain indifferent but also make fun of, criticize, and openly ridicule the other person's sin, then God

will permit you to fall as well, and the fire of your sin may turn out to be your initiation into Hell, according to Saint John Chrysostom.

The venerable Chrysostom insists that we must lament for the sins of others, if we truly love them. If the other

person is about to be devoured by a wolf, will we allow him to perish? If another person is in danger of drowning, will we let him sink?

Repentance erases all sins!

Two realities exist. The first is God's compassion and the

second is man's sinfulness. I will ask you: Which of the two is greater? No matter how many sins we have, they are a specific and finite amount. God's compassion, however, is infinite and immeasurable.

Saint John

Chrysostom uses the example of charcoal, in order to console sinful people. A lit charcoal will burn you. If, however, you throw this lit charcoal into the sea, which will prevail? The sea or the charcoal? The sea, of course. As soon as the charcoal hits the water, it

is extinguished and disappears.

Sin is a charcoal that scorches and burns our insides. What excruciating pain! Don't allow this condition to persist. Take hold of it during the life-saving moment of confession and throw it into the sea

of God's compassion. Your charcoal of sin will immediately be extinguished and disappear. If you tell me that you have not only one charcoal but many sins that are burning you, I will respond that God's mercy is not just a sea: it is an entire ocean.

Actually, it is something infinitely larger. The sea and the oceans have a certain limit, boundary, and end. God's compassion, however, is incalculable, limitless, and endless.

The venerable Saint John Chrysostom continues to assure us that

when we repent and weep, we should be certain that the sponge of God's love erases all our sins. "The Blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 Jn. 1:7). And the love of God wipes away all sins—not even a trace remains.

If you develop a

wound, it can be treated; however, the scar remains. If you have sinned, through repentance it is forgiven, it disappears, and there is no scar left behind.

Repentance gives rise to an extraordinary miracle: it makes God forget. God knows the

hearts of men; He knows all things. All of us, and all of our deeds are preserved in His memory. Yet, God Himself develops amnesia! He forgets the sins of people who repent sincerely.

How much courage and consolation does the venerable Chrysostom

(who possessed not only a golden mouth but also a golden heart) give us! Following the example of the Lord, he despises sin but loves the sinners. He stigmatizes the sinful passions but embraces the sinful people. Saint John Chrysostom fears lest the sinner falls into one of the

two extremes. One extreme is despair and hopelessness; the other is indifference and disinterest. The devil possesses two weapons, which he uses to give the finishing blow to sinners. One weapon is for people who are sensitive; the other, for them who are

insensitive.

For sensitive people he uses the weapon of despair and hopelessness. He attempts to demoralize the sinner: “Oh no! What have you done? There is no salvation for you now. Who can save you?”

The Christian must

respond by saying, “Get behind me, Satan of despair! Leave, you scoundrel, because your shadow is obstructing my view of the Cross of Christ, my great hope. I know that I sin, but I hope in God’s mercy.”

For them who are insensitive, the devil

possesses the weapon of indifference and disinterest: “Don’t worry, you’re a good person. What have you done, anyway, to repent? You’re not a criminal. You haven’t killed anyone. It would be great if everyone was like you!”

The Christian must object: “No! Get behind me, Satan of indolence and delusion. Leave, because your ugly figure is blocking the spiritual mirror and preventing me from seeing my true self and understanding that I am full of wounds and in need of treatment.”

Repentance has tremendous power. It takes charcoal and turns it into a diamond. It takes a wolf and makes it a lamb. It takes a wild man and transforms him into a saint. It takes the thief who was covered in blood and renders him the first citizen of Paradise.

Since repentance has such power, this is precisely why the devil struggles to discourage man from repenting. This explains why many people object to repentance and confession.

Some people ask: “Since I will sin again,

why should I confess? I'm just going to do the same things again …"

My brother, sin resembles illness. You do not become sick only once. You repeatedly become sick with the same disease. Every time you become sick, you visit the doctor and take

the medication he prescribes. Do the same thing for your soul. Every time you are injured—even if you are repeatedly injured in the same spot—repent and confess. At some point, the medicine of grace will completely cure your specific wound.

Frequently, sinful

passions resemble deeply rooted trees that seem difficult to remove. Have you ever seen how lumberjacks worked in the past? They would cut trees with an axe. Imagine a tree with a thick trunk and deep roots. The lumberjack strikes it with the axe; obviously, the

tree does not fall with the first whack. He strikes it a second time, a third time, a tenth time … . Eventually the tree starts to give and falls to the ground. It is the same with sinful passions. They may not fall over with the first swing of the axe. Continue steadily with

repentance to strike at the passion. Be assured that some day the passion will fall, and you will be freed from the sin that tormented you for years.

Saint John Chrysostom also remarks, "I repent, but I am ashamed to confess my sins. They are so many

that I am embarrassed to reveal them to the priest, to the confessor." Shame must exist; however, it should be present before, not after we sin. We should be ashamed to carry out evil, and not be ashamed to declare the evil we have committed.

Repentance is

confirmed through confession and the disclosure of our sins. Do not be embarrassed to declare your sins because, some day, our sins will be revealed. We will either reveal them here, on our own, to one person (i.e. the spiritual father), or God will uncover them on

Judgment Day in front of all the angels and the entire human race. If we repent and blame ourselves first, all our sins are forgiven and we are proclaimed innocent.

"I am so sinful that I doubt I will be saved," is another statement people make.

My dear brother and co-sinner: Paradise is not for them who are sinless. It is for sinners. Paradise is full of sinful people who repented. Paradise is open for us as well, as long as we take the first essential step: the step of repentance. If we do so, the Lord and God-man

will immediately take ten steps to embrace us. These are the steps of mercy and forgiveness.

Let us pray with pain and fervor: “Lord Jesus Christ, grant us genuine, tearful repentance. You remain our only hope of salvation. You are the Truth amongst so many

lies. You are our joy amongst so many sorrows. You are our redemption amongst so much sin. You are the peace in a world full of turmoil."

Glory to Thy compassion and tolerance, O Lord! Amen.

Homily 22

Orthodoxy: The Royal Path of the Gospel

My beloved children,

Today our Orthodox Church celebrates the memory of the Three Great Hierarchs, these champions of the Orthodox Faith. Therefore, I thought it would be suitable to speak about the Orthodox

Church and our Orthodox Faith. We are Orthodox Christians; however, in essence we are unaware of Orthodoxy's height, depth, and breadth. It is necessary for us to become familiar with the entire spectrum of Orthodoxy's holiness.

What is Orthodoxy?

Orthodoxy is the truth. It is the correct dogma of God, man, and the world, as it was handed to us by the incarnate God Himself through His extraordinary teaching, His holy life, and His redeeming sacrifice; as it was detailed, in following, by the divinely

inspired mind and heart of the Apostle Paul; as it was brought to life by the Disciple of love, Saint John the Evangelist, and the other Evangelists and Apostles with the heavenly light of the Holy Spirit; as it was handed to us by the spirit-moved fathers of Alexandria,

Constantinople, Cappadocia, Syria, Palestine, and, later, Mount Athos. All these individuals, from the venerable Polycarp (the disciple of the Apostles) up until Saint Nicodemos the Hagiorite (who fell asleep at the onset of the last century), through

their wisdom, holiness, sacrifices, and struggles entrusted us with the inheritance of proper faith and life: the treasure of Orthodox tradition.

Orthodoxy is the marvelous synthesis of dogma and ethos, theory and practice. Orthodoxy, furthermore, is what was

formally delineated by the holy Synods, these blessed ecumenical assemblies of Christ's worldwide Church. The God-bearing Fathers, "having amassed all the knowledge of the human soul and after making careful inquiry with the help of the divine

Spirit,"[49] gave answers to the biggest problems occupying man's spirit, and they laid the foundations of spiritual life; essentially, of spiritual civilization.

An entire sacred army of heroic confessors, consisting of millions of men, women, and

children martyrs throughout the centuries confirmed the truth of Orthodoxy with their precious blood. From the amphitheaters of Rome to the concentration camps of Russia, they proved that Christianity is not a simple theory but the truth and life itself—it is

the most splendid heroism, the victory over despicable acts of violence and tyranny, and the reign of the kingdom of the spirit.

Subsequently, Orthodoxy was extolled through the extraordinary literature and divinely inspired hymnology of its

liturgical worship, which combines the natural with the supernatural, the earthly with the heavenly, individuality with sociality, amity with solemnity, and the clearly comprehensible with the unfathomable.

During each Divine Liturgy, within the

uplifting yet solemn ambiance of the church, all the faithful participate in the sacrifice of the God-man. Moreover, this is where the accomplishments of the giants of our faith (who collectively comprise an ensemble headed by the Theotokos) are praised

and set on display. Extolled therein is the Christian dogma, not only because it is the truth, but also because it has the ability to satisfy human aspirations.

Even the ideal for which monasticism struggled is no different than the essence of

Orthodoxy. According to expert analysts, Orthodox monasticism constituted the spiritual army that fought for the acquisition of spiritual freedom and human perfection. Its purpose was to refashion the soul through the renewal of the mind.[50]

This is precisely the objective and achievement of monasticism, and the heart of the monastic spirit. The spiritual struggles of the ascetics are the new Olympic Games of the spirit, which lead man to true philosophy and

deification. The journey of asceticism is a journey of purification and return to God.

Orthodoxy imparted the understanding of holiness not only to the ascetics but also to the entire body of the Christian faithful. In this manner, it elevated the

ethical standards of society. This is readily apparent in the common perception and conscience of the people.

One of the fundamental attributes of Orthodoxy is philanthropy, in the full sense of the word: philanthropy not limited

to alms alone, but also extending to complete and comprehensive compassion toward man. Social services and programs are not an invention of recent centuries. They were initially created in Jerusalem after the Resurrection of our

Savior. This is where the first meals were distributed by the original seven deacons, as described in the Acts of the Apostles. Saint Paul, the winged Apostle to the Gentiles, was simultaneously the first social worker. As he preached the Gospel, he

also arranged the public contributions of love, which became known as *logia* or "collections" (cf. 1 Cor. 16:1-2). The successors of the Apostles, the bishops, were also social workers. There is no worse falsification of the truth than for someone to claim

that the Fathers of the Church were strictly concerned with nothing other than dogmatic issues. As the Ecumenical Synods were convening, simultaneously Saint Basil was building Vasiliada[51] in Caesarea. In Constantinople, seven thousand meals a day

were handed out to the poor, and the first obstetric centers were being established in Alexandria. Not only the bishops, but also the kings and monks would take part in the works of love. For all these people, the Orthodox faith was concurrently an Orthodox

way of life.

Another characteristic trait of Orthodoxy was heroism, as seen during martyrdom. This valor, however, was not limited to the blood spilled by the early martyrs. The children of the Orthodox Church invariably continued displaying

fortitude and bravery in the face of cruelty and brutality, whether it came from Julian the Apostate, Arians, Monophysites, iconoclasts, or Latin-minded monastics. Members of this heroic phalanx of the Orthodox Church include not only hierarchs like Saint

Athanasios the Great, Saint Basil the Great, and Saint John Chrysostom, but also figures such as Saint Theodore the abbot of the Studite Monastery along with his disciples, Saint Maximos the Confessor, Saint Mark the Gentle, and an infinite multitude of confessors

and champions of our faith.

A further mark of Orthodoxy that always existed was the transmission of Christianity and civilization to the barbaric nations. Our Church, without ever attempting to proselytize,

would radiate the light of the Gospel and educate using love and gentleness. The holy Three Hierarchs, whom we commemorate today, and who enlightened the entire world with the living waters of their correct teachings concerning God and man, especially point

us in this wise and disciplinary direction. The Three Hierarchs are the three shining stars of the Church's noetic firmament.

Orthodoxy always walked the royal path of the Gospel. It preserved the spirit of Christianity unadulterated in

opposition to the dark mysticism of eastern heresies, the Papal-Caesarean coalition of the Latins, and the subjective rationalism of the Protestants. Orthodoxy always maintained moderation and harmony. It never made a mistake because the Fathers were

guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Orthodoxy never disregarded man, wisdom, nature, or the arts. It was never inhumane. It sanctified everything it came into contact with, and it gave rise to modern civilization. According to the Dismissal Hymn of

Saint Basil the Great, “It clarified the nature of beings, and embellished the human ethics.”

Orthodoxy is a journey of man in his entirety toward his Maker and toward deification. It nurtures man to full maturity and perfect development in Christ

and for Christ. Orthodoxy is not only theology par excellence but simultaneously true psychology, genuine humanitarianism, and authentic sociality. It is a multifaceted diamond that reflects new rays of the truth from all its sides.

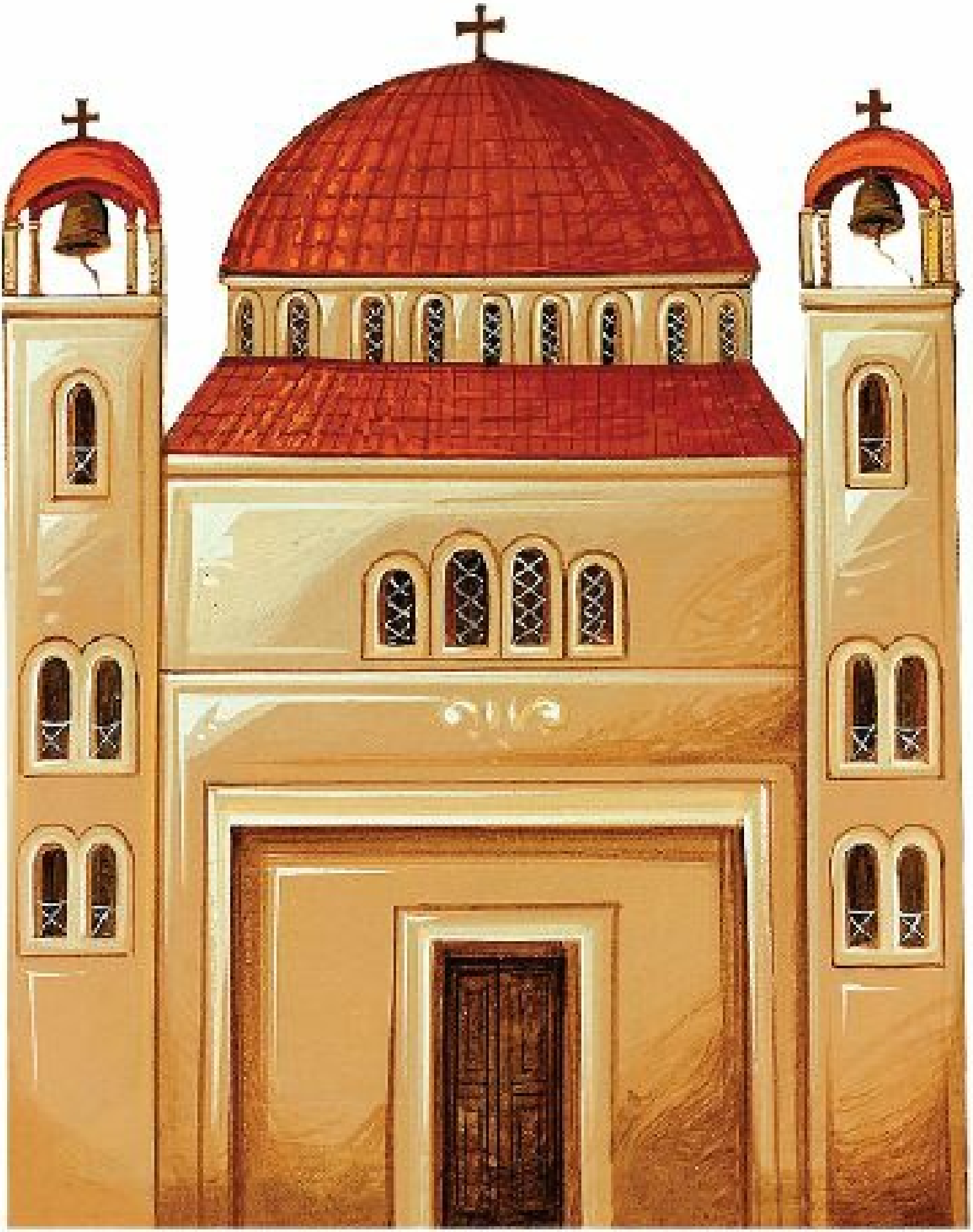
Therefore, let us familiarize ourselves with our Orthodox Faith—not in theory, but in practice. Let us feel it and live it in its entire breadth and depth. This is the only way we will be able to convey it to others and make good use of it. Because our Orthodox

Faith is neither a museum nor a thing of the past; rather, it is life, creation, and light. It is the lofty ideal of our nation, the golden hope of our salvation, and our boast in Christ. Let us proclaim it courageously and heroically as true and genuine children of its

distinguished heroes.

O glorious Orthodoxy! Thou art the Bride of Christ adorned with blood! May we the unworthy ones never ever deny Thee. On the contrary, if demanded by the circumstances and times, deem us worthy of spilling our last drop of

blood for Thee, O dearly beloved One. Amen.



The Orthodox Church

Homily 23

Love: The National Anthem of Paradise

My beloved brothers,

God is Love. “He who abides in love abides in God and God in him” (1 Jn. 4:17), thunders Saint John the Evangelist, the Apostle of love.

Love is the most beautiful flower within the garden of virtues,

which collectively comprise the bouquet of discretion. It is the most vivid color within the rainbow of Heaven. It is the most precious pearl on the crown of faith. It is the key that opens all the doors of human relations. It is the medicine that cures every illness of the

soul and body. It is the national anthem of Paradise.

A certain saint would pray with these words: “O Lord, allow me to help others, not for others to help me. Give me the strength to love, not to be loved. Give me the strength to be

understanding, not to be understood."

Love, the way it was taught by our Lord, not the way it is distorted by people, is an expression of sacrifice. It is a "sweet-smelling, spiritual aroma" (cf. Eph. 4:18). It is an expression of the heart, and an offering that

issues from a clement soul.

Love is not measured by what you give, but according to how you give. Love is not stretching out your hand only, but giving your heart as well. If you know how to share with others, then you know how to

love. “For God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7), declares the Apostle Paul.

God loves the merciful person who gives eagerly, with a cheerful face, and on his own accord. Alms offered with sorrow and reluctance are

unacceptable and are spurned. The root of charity is found in the heart. It originates from our heart and ends in the palm of our hands. Charity transmits warmth to others when the fire of love co-exists. Alms without love is frigid and oppressive. It is a dead

corpse void of the sun and light. It is a flower lacking beauty and fragrance. When someone gives without love, he is actually offering an insult. For what value does the most exquisite and expensive gift have when it is offered without a genuine smile?

Jesus asked us to pay close attention to the subject of alms. He condemned prideful almsgiving that is set on display. The Saints have emphatically instructed us on this issue.

The extraordinary and marvelous manner by which Saint Nicholas

helped the three poverty-stricken girls has left its mark in history not due to the amount of money that he gave—which certainly was noteworthy—but primarily for the discrete way in which he gave it. Saint John Chrysostom states that "hunger is a terrible thing." It can

sometimes blind a person and lead him to act improperly. Such was the case for these three young ladies: they were in danger of being led to immorality, for their father had reached a state of hopelessness. However, Saint Nicholas, who was full of love and

discretion, rushed to his aid at the appropriate moment. He took every precaution for his virtuous work to take place in secret and to remain unknown to people. He implemented the Lord's commandment: "Do not let your left hand know

what your right hand is doing" (Mt. 6:3).

Wasting no time, he filled a satchel with gold coins and carefully approached their home late at night. He tossed the valuable package into the house through an open window and quickly left. In the morning, the girls'

father could hardly believe his eyes. When Saint Nicholas learned that the father used the money as a dowry to marry off his first daughter, he went back and threw another bag of gold into the house in the same way. The poor father offered heartfelt

gratitude and praise to the Good Lord. Thus, he married off his second daughter.

Nevertheless, he wanted to discover the identity of his benefactor. He had a feeling that he would return a third time, so he remained awake late at night, listening for the

sound that would betray his benefactor. He was prepared to run, to catch, and to discover the good person who had saved him and his daughters. This is indeed what occurred. The compassionate saint who loved the poor was unable to hide during his third

secret attempt. As the father raced behind Saint Nicholas, he recognized him and thanked him for saving three souls from immorality. Saint Nicholas spoke to him with much love and adjured him not to mention this event to anyone.

Saint John the Merciful, this great and unmatched laborer of love, would study the lives of the saints extensively. He was particularly impressed by the life of Saint Serapion of Sidon, whom he revered greatly. Saint John frequently related

the following event from his life.

Once, Saint Serapion, who was renowned for his asceticism and poverty, encountered an extremely poor man. He felt so sorry for him that he removed his cloak and gave it to the poor person. As he continued along his way,

he saw another person who was quivering in the cold. What could he do? Without delay, he removed his remaining garment and offered it to his fellow man. He was left in a state of undress, only holding the Gospel in his hands. An acquaintance of his who

saw him without clothes asked in surprise: “Holy man of God, who left you bare?”

“This did,” replied Saint Serapion as he pointed to the Holy Gospel.

It was not long before he sold even the Gospel in order to offer the money

to the underprivileged. One of his disciples asked him: “Father, where is the small Gospel you used to have?”

“Didn’t the Lord say ‘sell your belongings and give to the poor?’” he replied. “This is the commandment I obeyed. I realized that I shouldn’t

even spare this book that contains the Lord's commandments, but rather sell it in favor of the poor."

A certain man of God stated, "Each soul who is overcome with love is already a reflection of God." Love both contains and transmits light. It is

simultaneously a carrier and a emitter of light. “He who loves his brother abides in the light” (1 Jn. 2:10).

The closer a person comes to God, the more enlightened and radiant he becomes. The more a person loves God, the more he loves others.

“Have you seen your brother? You have seen God!” remarks Saint Isaac the Syrian.

Truly, what good is it to conquer the universe if we cannot conquer our brothers with love. What good is it to explore and discover new galaxies if we do not succeed in

finding the “star” of Bethlehem; that is, the God of love? What new cosmos are we expecting the telescopes to show us if we remain ignorant of the “new commandment” of love? Without love, all things are pointless, ugly, and futile. “What a misfortune for us to lack

love!” exclaims Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk. All of man’s works and achievements acquire value only when they are accompanied by love.

Love, however, demands discretion, and discretion, in turn, is an art. If you are unfamiliar with the art of love, then

you do not know how to love. Love overlooks the flaws of our brother. It forgives mistakes. It tolerates bad habits. It gives way to obstinacy. It avoids criticism. It is oblivious to sarcasm. It disperses suspicions. It does not accept slander. It does not pass judgment or

debase others publicly. It covers all shortcomings in a polite and brave manner. “Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil”

(1 Cor. 13:4-6), thunders the Apostle Paul. Love, through its simplicity and sincerity, is unaware of evil. It is crystal clear like water from a pristine lake. No fierce wave of evil or deceit can disturb it.

The person who loves is the greatest victor in

the spiritual battle. He wins using a smile and kindness. In other situations, to yield constitutes a defeat; however, concessions made on account of love are a victory. Saint Gregory the Theologian advises: “Let us win using compassion.”

The trophies of love are glorious. The crowns of compassion are invaluable. Let us not forget that every great love is a crucified love. It carefully walks up all the steps leading to Golgotha. It feels pain, just as Christ suffered while on the Cross. Each offering

demands sacrifice, and every sacrifice is valuable.

"Whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward" (Mt. 10:42), promises the Lord. Love

conducts itself with discretion and kindness toward the person who is hungry, who is thirsty, who is a stranger, who is neglected, who is imprisoned—toward every suffering soul. People who are in jail are also our brothers. This is why the divine Apostle

Paul orders, “Remember the prisoners as if chained with them” (Hb. 13:3). We should feel as if we are confined in jail with them. The same holds true for various sorrows afflicting our brothers: we should share in their sorrow as if it were our own.

Someone stated the following: “The pain in this world is so vast! If you were to collect the tears that are shed each day from the human eyes, you would find yourself before the largest river on earth.” Love must not be implemented only when it is time to “rejoice with

those who rejoice," but it must also "weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15).

Each nation has its own national anthem, and so does Christianity. It has the Anthem of Love, which the great Apostle to the nations Paul has expressed in a most

exquisite manner, in the thirteenth chapter of his first epistle to the Corinthians.

May this sweet and melodious hymn constantly be on our lips and in our soul. Amen.

The Birth of St. Nektarios

Homily 24

Eternal Pascha and the Heavenly Kingdom

My blessed children,

In this homily, I would like to say a few words about the Resurrection and the joy of Pascha.

Down here on earth, during this great feast day of holy Pascha, every Christian feels a special joy in his soul, which, of

course, is insignificant in comparison to the joy of the other world. Nonetheless, Pascha is something that comforts our soul, makes it joyful, and fills it with grace, because in some way it draws nearer to Christ during this feast day.

Now let us examine

the Gospel passage that is read on Holy Saturday and on the day of the Resurrection. The Evangelist states that our Panagia and Mary Magdalene went to the tomb of the Lord early in the morning to attend to the Most-Holy Body of Christ and to carry out

what their great love dictated. At that time, a strong earthquake took place; an angel descended from heaven, rolled the stone away from the entrance of the tomb, and sat upon it. The angel then turned to the women and declared to them, “I know that you seek Jesus

who was crucified. He is not here; He is risen, as He said. Come and see the place where the Lord lay. Then go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see Him" (Mt. 28:5–7).

Upon hearing these words, the women were overcome by “fear and amazement” (cf. Mk. 16:8). They immediately set out with haste to announce this exceedingly joyous event to the Apostles—who were terrified and hiding in their house of

residence for “fear of the Jews” (Jn. 20:19)—so they could also rejoice.

As soon as the women started out, Christ met them and greeted them: “Rejoice! Do not be afraid! Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me” (Mt. 28:9-10). The

moment they beheld Christ—their love and their spiritual eros—they prostrated themselves before Him and worshiped Him. They embraced His feet tightly, unable to utter a single word as if thunderstruck! Who can describe the emotions racing through

the souls of these two holy women at that time! They did not doubt at all as the Apostles did when they encountered Him for the first time. When Christ appeared to the Apostles, they also rejoiced when they saw Him; however, they had inner doubts. In contrast,

the women did not disbelieve at all, but immediately expressed their love for Christ.

During these days of the Resurrection, this is more or less the type of love and joy that our Christ grants to souls who, to some degree, have purified their

spiritual senses from sin: “Let us purify our senses and we shall behold Christ, radiant with inaccessible light of the Resurrection, and we shall hear Him saying, Rejoice.”[52]

Down here in this world we celebrate holy Pascha for a very short

time. This joy ends and is again succeeded by sorrows, distress, temptations, and so many other afflictions. Conversely, up there in the other world Pascha will be eternal, without end, without sunset unto the ages of ages.

When our Christ

returns to judge the world, He will sit on a throne of glory. He will separate one group from the other (the righteous from the sinners), and He will issue the final verdict. The righteous will ascend to Heaven, while the sinners will descend to Hades—

definitively and permanently. In following, our Christ will begin an upward procession, followed by the holy angels, all the saints, and all the saved souls. All together, they will be singing the eternal Pascha. As they ascend, they will be chanting the

victorious hymns of the Resurrection, “exalting the eternal Pascha.”

The faces and the entire being of all the souls will be just as radiant as our Christ’s. Surrounded by this Divine Light of the Resurrection, they will ascend to acquire Paradise, the

Heavenly Kingdom, and the New Jerusalem.

"It is the Day of Resurrection! Let us be radiant, O people! Pascha! The Lord's Pascha."[53] They will chant and thunder victorious hymns according to the manner

in which God has ordered and appointed the spiritual choir there in an unconceivable festival. The souls will witness—for the first time—what God has prepared for them who overcame the world, by His grace.

According to the great Church Fathers who have

taught and informed us of this event, our Christ will sit on His throne of glory, and each rank of saints will approach to receive its corresponding crown and position in Paradise.

When the holy souls behold this beauty, this splendor, this wealth of God's wisdom being

revealed to them, when they take hold of it as a secured personal possession, and, furthermore, when they realize that, henceforth, they will live eternally and endlessly, they will be so amazed that they will not be able to express with words and thoughts

what God has prepared for them. They will wonder, “What did we offer to God? In the world we sinned so much, we grieved God so much, we gave Him so much bitterness. Now, instead of punishment, He is giving us this Heavenly Paradise!”

The holy Pascha of the divine Resurrection will never end for these souls. They will feel an inexplicable and indescribable joy! No affliction, no distress, no tears, no pain, no strife, absolutely nothing grievous will exist in that blessed life. Salvation

will be secured once and for all. Up there, festivals will take place within this heavenly joy. Christ's face will be the Light that will illuminate the entire spiritual world.

The Fathers tell us that a thousand paradises cannot even compare to

the mere vision of the Divine face of God—because to see His face is to see the Kingdom of God. This is why every soul in this world who feels the love of God asks for nothing other than to become worthy of beholding the face of Christ.

There once was a certain soul who loved our Christ unimaginably. Moved by this love, he desired to visit the Holy Land in order to venerate the tomb of his Divine Love. When he arrived and saw the tomb of Christ, Whom he loved intensely, he embraced

the tomb of our Christ, and there he surrendered his blessed soul into His hands and His love.

Let us try to purify the senses of our soul, using the method of watchfulness. Let us try not to pollute them, so that we become able, with the grace of God, to see

within our heart this light of the Divine Resurrection.

We are in the process of leaving this world and going to the other one. The temporary and short-lived afflictions of this world are insignificant in comparison to the reward we will receive in the

other world. However, they frequently seem very heavy, unbearable, and unending to us. This reveals our human weakness as well as the craftiness of the devil, who presents things to us in a very different way, in order to lead us securely into despair and

hopelessness by suggesting that the present torments will never end. But they do end, often in a single moment. And once we close our eyes, immediately, the vision and the reality of the spiritual world will open before us. Prior to this we

had seen people. Now, in an instant, we will see bright or dark spirits; that is, either angels or demons.

As soon as the eyes of the body close, instantly, the eyes of the soul open, and a person sees things he could not see previously with his bodily

eyes. Death is the bridge that transports us from this world to the next one.

We must begin to struggle correctly! We must face the fact that we are here temporarily and that we are permanently departing toward the other world. Here, we perceive Christ with the

feeling of our soul. There, if the mercy of God saves us, we will see Him “face to face” (Ex. 33:11).

During periods of grace, the soul that persistently struggles and wholeheartedly believes in the existence of God and the other life feels armed with the weapons

of light, grace, and divine eros. It feels as if it is standing before the Throne of God, ready to wage war against them who oppose Him Whom it worships and champions. Occasionally, it also feels dressed as a bride of the Heavenly Bridegroom, adorned with the beauty

of Heaven, overcome with love, and yearning for the moment of eternal union with the Heavenly Bridegroom.

How beautiful it is indeed when a Christian feels that he is a child of God, when he senses that God is his true Father! During such moments the

fear of death vanishes. Instead, one feels a wealth of confidence because his Father is the Judge, his Father is the One who will grant him His Kingdom. Abba Pambo would state, “Even if the sky falls to the earth, fear will not enter my soul.” This is because

he felt the love of God.

For a person to achieve a degree of this love, he must while still here in the world, here in this temporary arena, undertake certain efforts for God. He must continuously humble himself; he must endure temptations, afflictions,

and suffering; he must expel evil thoughts as soon as they appear. The person who succumbs to evil thoughts cannot possibly feel good inside and cannot see the light of the sacred Resurrection in his soul. When, however, someone leads an overall careful life, at an

unexpected moment, he will be visited by the grace of God.

This is the primary work of monasticism. It takes a person from the world who is filled with passions and weaknesses, laden with big and small sins, and marvelously refines him over time,

until, one day, it yields a spiritual and heavenly being filled with the love of God, and ready for the future life.

One such person was my ever-memorable elder. He was blessed in every way!

When he was still living in the world, prior

to becoming a monk, he did not know God at all. Later, when the grace of God overshadowed him and led him here to the Holy Mountain, to monasticism, to this hospital that is free of charge, the monastic way of life with its skill and science transformed him

into a heavenly being. We are the spiritual seed of this man.

In order for us to succeed as he did (as much as possible), we must follow in his footsteps. Therefore, let us struggle with all the strength of our soul while we are still in this world,

so that we come to know, with awareness of soul, the other world as well. Our goal in monasticism is this: to be acquainted with and to taste the things of the other world, thereby attaining so much love for our Christ that we long to see His Divine face.

The Fathers teach that in the other world the love of Christ, and the love that one soul feels for another, will be our nourishment. One person will look upon another and will feel a true paradise within himself.

Of course, we also feel this here to a small

degree. When the grace of God sets the heart ablaze, a spiritual person feels boundless love for his brothers. Within himself he feels as if he is embracing everyone: brothers, friends, enemies, as well as the entire lifeless creation. No matter what people do

to him, he will not be offended; rather, he will only express himself through acts of love. Then it is revealed to him why the infinite God with His infinite love endures sinful people despite all their evils!

Let us struggle, my fathers! Let us struggle

now that we are still here in order to prepare the essential provisions for Heaven. After death regret will be of no benefit to us. Let us make a new beginning. We should do whatever our conscience—our internal guide—advises us. Let us not ignore it, for it

instructs us with pinpoint precision.

With our conscience as an internal guide and the written word of God as our external guide, let us advance toward obedience. If we follow these two guides, we will assuredly be led to our Christ, and we will attain

the eternal and never-ending Holy Pascha of Heaven. Up there an eternal festival will take place. The angels, enriched with all that God has given them, will play heavenly resurrectional anthems to the delight of those souls who succeeded, who won the

heavenly “lottery.” Blessed and thrice-blessed will be the monks and nuns who comprise the tenth rank of angels.[54] They who attain this position in Heaven will see the face of Christ unto the ages of ages. These successful monastics will chant

together with the angels. They will celebrate, rejoice, and bless Christ Who sacrificed Himself, Who was crucified, Who was resurrected, and Who saved the human race.

Let us pray that we the lowly and insignificant people—of whom I am the first—find

ourselves amongst this rank of angels, in the former place of Lucifer, to the glory of God, to the glory of Him Who sacrificed Himself, to the glory of the blameless Lamb. Amen.

Homily 25

Obedience Is Life; Disobedience Is Death

Dear fathers,

The kindness and the goodness of God reigned within the life of the first-created people in Paradise. There was nothing to disturb their existence. Everything testified to the love of God. God would visit

them every evening and instruct them as necessary. The first-created people felt God, they would hear His voice, and their life flowed peacefully and joyfully. They possessed every good thing within Paradise—above all, the great bliss of God's

presence.

The devil, however, "the ancient evil," the deceitful deceiver, envied this happiness of the first-created people. He envied God's communion with them, he developed a hatred for them, and desired to assail this blessed state of man. His

immense and boundless malice toward God prompted him to grieve God by attacking the first-created people. He could not confront God directly. He schemed, contemplated, and devised a plan. He cunningly conceived a way to undermine man,

this select creation of God (in order to deny him the Kingdom of God and the fortune of Paradise), and simultaneously sadden God, thus satisfying his malice.

One day, while Eve was curiously gazing at the tree of knowledge of good and evil, he

approached her and asked, "Why don't you eat from this beautiful fruit?"

"God told us that we must not eat from it," Eve replied. "This is precisely why we do not touch it."

"No! If you eat from this fruit, you will become gods too. You will come to know good

and evil, wickedness and virtue, and in this manner you will become equal to God.”

Initially, Eve tried to remain obedient; however, during the second assault of the evil one, she paid attention to the devil’s words that were uttered through the

serpent. She noticed that the fruit was indeed very beautiful, and she believed that by eating it they would become gods, and they would attain similar glory and power. So, having yielded to the assault,[55] she proceeded to consent, and finally she transgressed in deed.

After she ate from the fruit, she gave it to Adam as well. Thus, they both sinned with their disobedience.

After they sinned, after they transgressed and disobeyed God's commandment, they noticed that they were naked. Prior to this, they

were unaware of their nakedness because they lived with innocence and simplicity. The moment they recognized that they were naked, they felt ashamed.

God witnessed their disobedience. That same evening He came and called Adam: “Where are

you, Adam?”

“I heard your footsteps, my God, and I was afraid,” he answered. “I was embarrassed and I hid.”

“But why? Who told you that you are naked? And why were you afraid now, since you were never afraid before? Did

you perhaps disobey and eat from the fruit that I had forbidden you to eat? Is this the reason you feel this way?"

"It's not my fault! Eve is to blame, whom You gave me as a companion."

God proceeded to Eve. He asked her the same

question and received the same answer: that she was not to blame. She transferred the responsibility to the serpent. God tried to avoid punishing them. He specifically questioned them so they could ask for forgiveness, and so He could in turn forgive

them, not evict them from Paradise, and not sentence them to death. However, one sin leads to another. Disobedience gave rise to talking back, and talking back led to their condemnation.

The same thing takes place with every person. When someone obeys the

will of God, within him reigns goodness, contentment, and the wealth of God's grace. He senses God within himself, he feels the awesome divine protection, he feels blissful and joyful. The moment, however, he sins and transgresses the will

of God, he is deprived of this joyful state. He feels extremely unhappy and uneasy because his conscience accuses him for not keeping God's commandments. On account of his disobedience, Adam introduced death—both of the soul and body—to the

human race.

Physical death is the separation of the soul from the body, whereas spiritual death is the separation of the soul from God. This separation of the soul from God is a terrible thing. When we are deprived, even for a short while, of God's

grace on account of some sin, we feel overwhelming misery within us. We taste bitterness, our spirit is unsettled, and nothing in this world is capable of pleasing us. We attempt to heal our soul, and we anxiously await for God to forgive us, so we can

feel better. We usually experience this state for a few moments, a few hours, or a few days.

However, to be completely and eternally deprived of God is something dreadful, something unfathomable for the human mind. This deprivation of God in the

other world, unfortunately, will not be the only dreadful thing. Additionally, there will be co-habitation with the demons—condemned humans will dwell together with the demons in outer darkness and in endless sorrow.

Our Christ, the new

Adam (cf. 1 Cor. 15:45-49), through His obedience to His Heavenly Father liberated man. Through His death on the Cross, He restored man not to an earthly Paradise, but to a spiritual Paradise in Heaven with incomprehensible glory and bliss.

Adam disobeyed God and was expelled from Paradise. He sat, as described in a hymn of the Triodion,[56] across from Paradise. As he stood gazing at Paradise from afar, he cried and lamented: “O Paradise! You were planted for me

and closed through Eve … .” He was addressing Paradise as if a person. He was pleading, “O Paradise, with your beautiful trees! Use your leaves, your fruits, and your flowers to beg God to take pity on me and to allow me to re-enter.” But it was too late. This plight

could no longer be rectified with his prayer and supplication alone.

Christ through His obedience and by dismissing His own will, as a representative of the human race, sacrificed Himself, shed His All-Holy Blood and redeemed us. Then He lifted us

(washed and clean) on His shoulders like a prize, like a trophy of victory, and He proceeded to present us to His Heavenly Father like a sacrifice, like game He caught through His ingenious, divine strategy.

The devil used the

serpent. He entered it, spoke cunningly to Eve, and thus caused man's downfall. Christ became the "noetic serpent."[57] He used the human nature He assumed to overthrow the devil and achieve this great victory. The slain Lamb was victorious (vid. Rev. 5:12). We must love

our Christ with all our heart, with all our soul, and with our entire being; for He sacrificed Himself, He gave His life, He redeemed us, He expunged our criminal record, and thus He led us freely to obtain spiritual Paradise.

Let us detest from the

depth of our soul the attitude and conduct of the first-created people, so we do not suffer identically. The first-created man disobeyed God both in thought and in deed. He first consented internally and then proceeded to action. Thus, this momentous

disobedience took place with its terribly dire consequences.

Conversely, through His perfect obedience and submission to the will of His Father, our Christ redeemed us, won us, and placed us in Paradise. Disobedience gives rise to death; obedience gives

rise to life.

We know this from our own lives as well. Whenever we disobey, we feel awful, we feel unhappy, we feel guilty, we feel bitterness, we feel deprived of God's grace! Conversely, when we obey and struggle to fulfill our obedience with

precision, we feel happiness and comfort within us. Our conscience triumphs, and we do not fear death, because we sense that obedience leads us to God. Our egotism makes it difficult for us to obey and to let go of our own will; this is why we argue. Talking back is the

exact opposite of humility. Humility keeps the mouth closed, it puts a stop to evil thoughts, and man does not retort. Pride and egotism give rise to talking back.

Adam talked back to God by transferring the responsibility to Eve. She, in turn, blamed the

serpent, and both ultimately blamed God. Adam said, "*You* gave me Eve. You are to blame, because if *You* had not given her to me, I would not have disobeyed." And Eve continued to maintain, "You are at fault, my God. You created the serpent who

deceived me." Thus, they both threw the blame on God, and in this manner they reached the limits of impiety and ingratitude. They made incorrect use of their free will. God tested them, but they failed.

The same thing takes place today. The disciple

is put through the test and exercise of cutting off his will. If a disciple cuts his will, he receives the trophy of the "heavenly call" (cf. Php. 3:14), he becomes a "miniature" Christ; that is, he becomes a disciple who resembles Christ. This is why we must detest

disobedience and back talk with all our soul. As Abba Palamon states, “He who carries out the commandments of his elder does not need to concern himself with the commandments of God.”[58] We must constantly and ceaselessly

be prepared to cut off our own will. Obedience brings the entire Godhead within man, while disobedience displaces God from within him.

The matter has been clearly defined. Now that we are disciples and are walking along the path of obedience with effort and

toil, let us not allow disobedience and back talk to lead the way. This will not be to our advantage. Obedience must not be limited to our chores alone. Obedience is primarily spiritual in character: it consists of executing our obedience precisely the way our

elder desires. Spiritual obedience corresponds to the soul, whereas obedience in work assignments corresponds to the body. The difference is enormous!

We are advised by the elder to confess everything because we have witnessed repeatedly

throughout our monastic life that everyone who hid his thoughts from his elder—every single one of them—erred and suffered shipwreck. The devil whispers many things to us. He makes us feel embarrassed. But since everything is known to God, and nothing is

hidden from His eyes and His heart, why should we hide them? When we reveal our thoughts and sins, we are revealing and uncovering the devil. Once the devil is exposed, he can no longer stick around. When a snake slithers out of its nest into an open area, it quickly

flees and tries to hide so that man does not kill it. Similarly, once the devil comes out through confession, he hastily departs because he no longer has anywhere to hide.

Many times the devil whispers to us, “Don’t tell it to the elder, it is

nothing bad. The evil thought will pass; be patient." Hence, little by little he persuades the monk not to make a frank and beneficial confession. Things slowly begin to pile up one after another, and a nidus of infection forms within the heart and soul of the disciple,

which slowly develops into cancer. And cancer is accompanied by excruciating pain and subsequent death. The devil takes great pains to convince the novice to hide his thoughts as soon as he enters the monastery, while he is still full of egotism and

pride.

There is a wonderful event from the life of Abba Poimen recorded in *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*. While Abba Poimen was still a young novice, he was once troubled by three thoughts. Thus, he set out to visit his spiritual father

and elder, so he could reveal these three thoughts to him. He walked for an entire day. By the time he arrived, he had forgotten one of the three thoughts and only confessed the two. It was only when he returned to his hut and took out his key to unlock the door

that he remembered the third thought. At that moment, he did not proceed to unlock the door, but immediately set out again and journeyed another day in order to confess that thought. When his elder saw him he said, “My son, you have returned so

quickly!”

“Geronda, I forgot to tell you one thought, and I came back to confess it.”

When the elder witnessed Abba Poimen’s conscientiousness and self-denial, he exclaimed, “Poimen, Poimen! A shepherd of angels.[59] Your name will become

known throughout the entire land of Egypt!”

Abba Poimen’s fame not only extended to the Egyptian borders but also spread throughout the entire world from one generation to the next. This is how God rewards the people who do His will.

However, there are examples of other disciples who did the opposite. Such disciples lived alongside their elder and yet hid their thoughts —something unacceptable and unorthodox. When the disciple hears the devil whisper, “Do not tell your

elder," he must realize that this voice and advice is a demonic deception and trap. The disciple should wonder, "Why is this thought telling me not to inform my elder? What's going on? Isn't the elder my professor and guide? Doesn't he know how to help me?

Isn't he the physician of my soul? How will I get better if I cover up my wound?" For this reason we must accurately and sincerely confess our thoughts and our actions.

If we carry out spiritual obedience in this manner, we will achieve our objective, which is

the acquisition of God within our heart. Let us struggle in the domain of absolute obedience. Let us despise talking back and disobedience. Let us resemble our Christ. If we follow in the footsteps of His obedience, we will arrive where our Christ Himself is seated upon a

throne of glory.

When a good disciple constantly uncovers and reveals his inner world to his spiritual father and elder, when he confesses sincerely and simultaneously corrects whatever requires attention, he will not be troubled at all when he

passes through the toll-houses. His conscience will confirm the truth and release him from the extreme fear and trembling associated with death. Immensely fortunate is the disciple who acquires a tranquil conscience through perfect obedience.

When a disciple lays everything out clearly before his elder, he receives forgiveness, he is freed from all demonic influence, and he advances along the spiritual path. As a result of this entirely well-ordered state, a tranquil conscience is created,

which gives rise to boldness before God. Boldness of conscience frees man from every threat of hell. Hence, each one of us must think as follows: “I am a disciple. Why not do these very simple things since they will grant me so many gifts, allow me to cleanse

my conscience, enable me to pass through the toll-houses fearlessly without stumbling, and to achieve the huge success of seeing my Christ and Judge with a pleased countenance?”

Saint John Chrysostom says, “We should pray to encounter the Judge with a

sympathetic face, and not to see His serene eyes turning away from us at the time of judgment." If the Divine face turns away from us, this will be the first impression of eternal damnation for our soul. When, however, we constantly think about how to live properly and

how to uproot our self-will, when we continuously study the Fathers and meditate on death, judgment, hell, and paradise, when all these become the ceaseless contemplation of our mind and heart, then with the grace of God, it is impossible for us not to

attain salvation.

The years go by, life flows like water, and it disappears like the path of a bird in flight. Our life is nothing. It will race by quickly and come to a sudden end. What we gain, however, will be eternal. A disciple's soul becomes as light as a

feather when he expels his own will, and when he regulates his thoughts according to the recommendations of the Fathers—because then he walks the proven path of salvation.

What is better than obedience! No other way of life is so free of

accountability as the life of a disciple. When a disciple does everything with obedience, he will not give an account to God for anything—the road before him is open for Heaven.

We must continuously meditate on the law of God, and we should think

about death day and night. This remembrance of the soul's departure is an awakening. Man is awakened when he considers what will occur at the time of his departure, when he brings to mind that one day, sooner or later, he will meet the Righteous Judge.

This is where the difficulty lies. The time of death itself is frightening; however, the soul is even more terrified when it passes through the aerial toll-houses, because the demons have everything documented in detail, and the soul finds itself before

all these records.

This entire contemplation and way of life we have set forth will prevent the toll-houses from accusing us. This contemplation will preserve the soul's health. When someone is healthy, life is enjoyable, and he has overall prosperity.

The same thing holds true spiritually. When a person feels free from passions, this is an indication of spiritual health. This healthy condition, in turn, bestows a state of general well-being to the soul, and a person senses God within himself.

The Fathers speak about self-acting prayer. This is nothing other than the enthronement of Christ within the heart. In order for Christ to come into the heart of man, all this effort, self-coercion, and vigilance must take place beforehand. We must not allow this

opportunity to slip away. God has brought us here to the monastery. We do not know how long we will live. For this reason, we must continuously exert ourselves. Spiritual contemplation, prayer, silence, and obedience should be part of our daily routine without fail.

We each have our own job to attend to every day, and we know exactly what we have to do at work. The exact same thing applies spiritually as well: our soul must also be engaged in spiritual work. When the day begins and we start working at our assigned

task, we should also begin our spiritual labor—both should take place simultaneously. As the body works, the soul should also be working. Our mouth should be repeating the Jesus Prayer, and our mind should be following the

Prayer,[60] so that we are ready to confront sinful thoughts.

The devil may give us thoughts against God and our brothers, or he may remind us of worldly things. All these assaults should be confronted with the Prayer, indifference, or rebuttal. When we

work in this manner every day, it is impossible for us not to learn the spiritual "handicraft," the spiritual art and science.

As we labor at our ministry, we should be contemplating the name of Christ in order to avoid talking idly, which always results in sin. When we

talk idly, the demons drop in on us and start going from one person to the next advising, “Say this thing; say that … .” Thus, idle talk carries on with its ugly consequences. When, however, the Prayer is being said, the demons flee far away because they cannot stand

to hear the name of Christ. “Flog the enemies with the name of Jesus,”[61] advises Saint John Climacos. When, however, we do not flog them with the Prayer, they draw near and inundate us with thousands of impure

thoughts.

Even when we gather for the common services in church in order to pray and glorify God, are not the demons there as well? Even in church they come and whisper thousands of things to us. We must be extremely careful in church.

When we pray during the night, we must compel ourselves to have as few things as possible on our mind and prevent it from wandering around. The person who manages to limit his mind to a few simple thoughts (such as the name of Christ, the hour of death, the beauty

of Paradise, and the love of God) will purge it of every demonic contemplation. When we supply our mind with such spiritual assignments, we will exclude the devil's assignments, and we will certainly feel joy, peace, and whatever else our

good God grants to our hearts.

In this way we will not accept evil thoughts against our brothers. Oftentimes the devil precipitates within us a state of annoyance or spiritual disorder. He uses such opportune moments to flood us with thousands

of thoughts against our brothers. In these instances, it is necessary for a monk to stop thinking, to ignore the evil thoughts, to take hold of the Prayer, and, thus, prevent all demonic activity from continuing. In such times of difficulty we can withdraw to our

cell to pray (with either our prayer rope or our own personal words), in order to distance the devil, restore peace to our soul, and thus put an end to all judgmental thoughts.

During the Revelation, Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist

saw a multitude of souls who were dressed in white, bathed in immense grace and light, and chanting heavenly hymns. He asked the angel who was guiding him and explaining these heavenly matters to him, “Who are these people who have attained so much glory

and are chanting these incomprehensible hymns?" The angel replied, "These are the virgins. They are the ones who will follow the Lamb unto the ages of ages" (cf. Rev. 14:4).

They were the saved monastics who will follow Christ unto the

ages of ages, who will behold His face unto the ages of ages. They will comprise the tenth rank of angels.

Just think: God appointed and destined us to become angels![62] We lament our misfortune during times of sorrow and temptations and we

sigh every so often, but a brilliantly radiant place of light awaits us, which was once occupied by Lucifer. We will replace the fallen rank, the tenth rank of angels. There we will all chant like the angels, find perfect rest, and secure the eternal bliss of beholding the face of

Christ.

Heaven is open and awaits us. “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Mt. 25:34). Saint Andrew the Fool for Christ had a vision in which he describes the

beauty that exists up above. Man's mind cannot grasp the bliss and happiness of the other world. In times of affliction and torment, we should turn our eyes in that direction and consider how much we will be rewarded for the things we endure. Up

above there will be no sun: the light of God will illuminate that entire world. When a soul beholds the beauty of the other souls, it will feel paradise internally. The mere thought and conviction that this state will never end will suffice. The soul will no

longer be deprived of that brilliant Paschal day, that Sabbath, the beauty of Paradise, and the ineffable majesty of Heaven.

My fathers, let us constantly think of these things, and let us aspire to reach the sublime objective of our monastic

calling. Amen.

St. John the Evangelist and

Homily 26

Christ-like Obedience

My blessed children, Today we will speak

about Christ-like obedience. We will begin our talk with a most edifying example of obedience from *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*.

There was a certain elder, a spiritual man, who had an outstanding disciple. From the very first day this disciple

arrived, the elder would counsel him every evening at the end of Small Compline[63] and then send him to rest, so they could rise in the morning to read the Orthros service.[64]

One day, while this disciple was reading

Small Compline, his elder fell asleep. The Compline ended, and the elder continued sleeping. When the disciple saw that his elder had been overcome by sleep (because he had worked very hard during the previous day), he did not want to wake him in order to receive his

blessing as usual before departing, but he decided to wait patiently instead.

The devil, noticing that this disciple had the good habit of obtaining his elder's blessing prior to retiring each evening, wanted to put an end to it and began to whisper, "Leave. The elder is

sleeping. Don't disturb him. Go!"

To this the disciple replied, "I shouldn't bother him now. I will be patient and let him rest."

"Leave," the thought persisted. "You will waste a lot of time, and you will not have time to rest. How will you get up for

the service? You were working all day long.”

“No! I will be patient.”

He was attacked seven times by such thoughts, and he resisted them all seven times.

After quite a long while, the elder woke up and realized that much

time had passed. When he saw that his disciple was still there, he asked him, “My child, you didn’t leave?”

“Geronda, how can I leave without your blessing? You did not give me permission to go. How could I go rest and leave you like that?”

“Since things turned out this way and it is now time for Orthros, let’s read the service, and then you can go rest.”

“May it be blessed.”

Indeed, they read the service, and then the disciple went to go rest with the permission and blessing of his elder. The

elder went to rest as well.

While asleep, the elder saw the following: He found himself within a chapel where there was a resplendent bishop's throne, and, upon the throne, he noticed that there were seven magnificent crowns. As the elder was admiring

them, he thought to himself, “What beautiful crowns! They likely belong to a great ascetical elder! They must be the fruit of many labors, efforts, and virtues.” As he was contemplating this, a venerable holy man approached him and asked, “What is your

opinion of these crowns, Geronda?”

“I am thinking that they must belong to some great ascetic, who acquired them through his struggles.”

“No! You are mistaken. These crowns belong to your disciple.”

“My disciple? But

how?”

“Yes, certainly! Your disciple. He acquired them last night. Ask him and you will find out.”

After this, the elder came to himself. In the meantime, his disciple continued resting until morning, at which time he came to receive the

elder's blessing before beginning his chores.

"My child," asked the elder, "what type of thoughts did you have last night? What kind of a struggle did you have?"

"I wasn't bothered by anything, Geronda. I was fine."

"Try to think.

Reconsider how you spent the night."

"I'm not sure, Geronda. The only thing I can tell you is that after you fell asleep during Small Compline, I was battled seven times with thoughts of either waking you up, or leaving you and going to rest.

However, I resisted and did not give into these demonic thoughts until you woke up, as you are aware. I did have this battle, but there was nothing else."

"Very well, my child. Go to your work."

Thus, the elder confirmed that his

disciple indeed acquired seven crowns in one night by resisting the evil thoughts. And he was just a beginner; he had only been a disciple for a short while.

This edifying narrative teaches us that a disciple makes great gains when he

conscientiously carries out Christ-like obedience. This monk resisted the devil's attack because he had been taught by his elder how to confront thoughts. By executing this spiritual obedience, he gained seven crowns.

Likewise, we teach according to the Fathers

and state that if we want to be saved, if we want to walk comfortably, courageously, securely, and with the hope of prospectively receiving great honor and glory from God, then we must put into action this blessed virtue of obedience. Full of guile,

the tempter craftily attempts to approach in any way he can, intending to strip, expel, and shatter precise obedience from the disciple, in order to render him a disciple "in form," while essentially making him idiorrhythmic.[65] How does someone become

idiorrhythmic? He lives in a monastery, within a brotherhood, in fellowship, but because he does his own will (i.e., he acts without asking and without receiving a blessing), he becomes a disciple "in form," when in fact he lives idiorrhythmically.

Every single thing a disciple does without the seal of obedience is invalid. No matter how beneficial it seems, no matter how virtuous it appears, it will not last if it is not stamped with an appropriate blessing. We can prepare a document in accordance with every

required format and guideline. However, when the document is not signed by the appropriate person, no matter where it is sent, it is invalid. The recipients will ask, “Has it been signed? Does it have a seal? If yes, fine. If not, then you must obtain the authorized

signature. You must have the appropriate person stamp it and seal it before we can proceed with the matter."

The same is true with obedience. The elder's seal and signature alone contains power and validity. When the elder says, "Yes my child, go

ahead, proceed, you have the blessing," things will go well. When, however, the disciple does his own will according to his own judgment, no matter what he does, it has no value before God. Even though idiorrhythmic thoughts may suggest to someone that "you are proceeding

well," that "this work is good," and "you will enjoy this activity because you are becoming spiritually rich, you are undertaking a spiritual and monastic struggle," in reality, a false hope of salvation is generated. Let us not be fooled: this is a deception.

For example, among our obligations as monks, we have the duty to attend church. Each monastery has the catholicon[66] at its center. Monks living in a monastery are obligated to be present in church during the services. When a monk

(who lives in a monastery) is absent from church for the slightest reason, this equates to disobedience: he is not fulfilling one of his mandatory obligations. Sometimes we are tempted to excuse ourselves when we feel a bit of pain, or a little

dizzy, or our foot hurts, etc. Why should we be absent from church, from the assembly of the brothers, from the warmth of the services and the Divine Liturgy? Is this not disobedience? Sacrifice and self-denial are demanded of us. The elder advises us not to be

absent from church, unless a specific circumstance, such as an illness or an assignment we are fulfilling outside the monastery, prevents us from going. I am simply using this as an example of a transgression of one spiritual obedience.

A disciple has the obligation to receive the blessing of his elder before he goes anywhere, before he leaves to carry out a task. How can someone go out of the monastery without receiving the blessing of the elder? What will happen if he dies on the

way? The first thing Christ will ask a disciple when his soul is being judged is if he fulfilled his most significant obligation: the virtue of obedience. Christ will ask, “My child, did you do your works with a blessing and obedience? If yes, come inside.” He

will see the seal of obedience. He will examine the disciple's documents and his works. Whatever is stamped with the seal will be approved; whatever is not will be condemned and rejected as something worthless. We should be very careful not to do anything that is

not within the boundaries of obedience; not to do something without the consent and blessing of the elder.[67]

God's blessing will be great, the merit and honor before God will be inconceivable when a disciple departs from this world via physical death,

passes through the toll-houses with ease, and enters into the next life without danger or difficulty. How will a person approach the toll-houses, these groups of furious and malicious demons, who possess in their hands a person's sins and mistakes! The

mere thought of this moment instills fear and trembling.

When a disciple, however, completes his life successfully in obedience, he will easily advance directly to the throne of Christ and worship Him. Christ, in turn, will bless him

because He will see in this disciple a successor to the obedience that He did to His Heavenly Father. When He sees this little disciple standing before Him, He will remember the obedience He did to His own parents, Joseph the Betrothed and our

Panagia, while in this world.[68] Thus, when a disciple presents himself before Christ as a victorious champion embellished with the beauty and splendor of obedience, Christ will lead him into His private chamber. What is this

private chamber of the Lord? It is the blessed, brilliant, and vacant area that was previously occupied by Lucifer's rank. He will receive a position near the throne of Christ, from where he will chant hymns to Christ eternally within inexpressible glory and

honor.

A disciple gains all these things by simply doing obedience—nothing more! No philosophy or theology is required. “Forgive me,” and, “May it be blessed” are all someone needs to know. Thereafter, the disciple securely

advances toward Heaven. We have been granted the best portion! We have been chosen—not I, but you—by God for this monastic obedience. What is more blissful? What is better? If you knew what you have in your possession and were able to appreciate fully

God's gift, you would be elated. Blessed is he who holds fast to obedience and the advice of his elder. He holds in his hands the precious pearl, he has found the treasure mentioned in the Holy Gospel (vid. Mt. 13:44), and he will be rich in Heaven.

Blessed is the disciple who has a humble mindset and who is obedient, for he will gloriously enter the Kingdom of God. This simple monk is the wisest and most successful human being. This is whom I envy!

My ever-memorable

elder would say, “Many hesychasts and hermits cannot be compared to a good disciple.”

“Why do you say this, Geronda?” we would ask.

“Because a hesychast does his own will; he does as he pleases. The good disciple, however, did not come here to do his own

will but his elder's will!" Self-will is the obstacle to obedience because man's freedom is restrained and confined.

When I was a disciple, I lived, experienced, and tasted these things. Now I long for them, but now I give orders and make things difficult for others

—woe unto me! Since we are unaware of the hour and moment of death, make every effort to be found in a proper state of obedience, so you can proceed upward, from where you can pray for me the wretch as well.

A certain disciple had an elder. In the beginning,

while he was still a novice, apparently he had not made any progress because he would object, talk back, disagree with, and sadden his elder. He was the son of a policeman, and he had come to be a monk just outside of Great Lavra on Mount Athos. His elder

would advise him of the necessary things, but he continued to conduct himself poorly. One day his elder said, “My son, you’re not going to be saved like this. We’re not accomplishing anything. I cannot tonsure you a monk the way you’re behaving. You either have

to listen, or else I'm going to send you back to your father. If you do not change your ways, you will have to leave in a few days."

When the disciple heard this, it was as if he woke up from a coma, from a state of drunkenness, from a

demonic daze. He immediately responded to his elder, “Geronda, what can I do to please you so I can become a monk? Don’t send me back. I don’t want to return to my father and the world.”

“My child, I’m not asking for you to learn theology or philosophy.

You only need to learn two simple things.”

“What are they, Geronda?”

“‘Forgive me,’ and ‘May it be blessed.’ When I tell you to do something, you will answer, ‘May it be blessed.’ When you do something wrong, you

will immediately say, ‘Forgive me, Geronda. I have sinned. I made a mistake, I apologize.’”

“I’ll stay then, Geronda. It’s not so difficult. I’ll try. Give me your blessing.”

Henceforth, this disciple put his elder’s advice into action. After

some time, his elder told him, “My child, take your knapsack, fill it with our handicrafts and go up to Karyes. Sell everything, buy the things I told you, and then come back.”

In those days there were no motorboats like today. There was a small rowboat with oars that the

fathers used to go to Daphne. From there they would climb to Karyes by foot. After running their errands, they would return. It would take them many hours to travel from Daphne to Great Lavra by boat, and from there to make it up to their hermitage!

Indeed, the disciple took his knapsack with the handicrafts. After hours of rowing, he arrived at Daphne. From there he went up to Karyes, fulfilled his obedience, and set back. During the grueling return journey, he became very sweaty. The fathers in

those days would wear their raso and koukouli[69] in the boat in order to read the Vespers and the Small Compline until they arrived at the monastery of Great Lavra. This is how the young monk was dressed as well, and so he became drenched in sweat.

However, because he was exceptionally modest, he was embarrassed to change his shirt during the lengthy trip. He kept wearing the same clothes and ended up with a serious cold. In those days, tuberculosis was taking many lives, just as cancer is today. Due to

their ascetical diet (which consisted of only the essentials), his respiratory infection eventually developed into advanced tuberculosis.

When this disciple could no longer stand on his feet and was nearing death, his elder tonsured him a great-schema monk

and named him Akakios. By that time, Akakios had excelled in obedience. A few minutes before leaving this world, he saw his angel and called out to his elder, “Geronda, do you see the angel who is beside me?”

“No, my child. I do not see him.”

“He’s right here, Geronda! Don’t you see how beautiful he is?”

With these words, he gave up his holy soul into the hands of the angel, and he acquired Paradise in a short time simply through his obedience.

The malevolent demon comes and tempts

us with a thousand and one thoughts, his sole intention being to distance us from obedience. How much does he distort our reasoning in order to divert us from the correct approach to obedience!

We read the following in the life of Saint

Paisios: On account of his extraordinary virtue and asceticism, Saint Paisios acquired great boldness before Christ; accordingly, our Lord frequently visited him.

During one of our Christ's visits, Saint Paisios washed Jesus' feet —in a way, of course, that

is truly indescribable—and he kept the water in a basin. Shortly thereafter, one of his disciples returned from a certain obedience, from some difficult job, tired and sweaty. After he prostrated himself before Saint Paisios, the saint said to him, “My child, go

over to the basin, and drink some water to refresh yourself."

"May it be blessed," responded the disciple. However, he did not go to drink from that sanctified water, which had been used to wash the Immaculate feet of our Christ. His thought, or

rather the demon, instructed him, “This elder has no brain. I came back from a lengthy journey exhausted, and instead of sending me to the spring to drink clean water, he’s sending me to the basin to drink dirty water! This is not right.” And so, he did not go to

drink.

During his next meeting with Saint Paisios, the saint asked him, “My child, did you go to drink water from the basin?”

Of course, he knew that he had not done so.

“Forgive me, Geronda. I did not go

because I was expecting you to send me to the spring or to give me a pitcher with clean water, but instead you sent me to drink water from the washbasin. Who knows where that water has been? With these thoughts in mind, I did not go to drink because I

did not find your request to be in good judgment."

The saint then sighed, "You poor man! If you only knew what you deprived yourself of! That wash water was sanctified; it contained all the graces of Christ. It was no ordinary wash water. It was water that

was used to wash the feet of Christ! If you would have drank from it, you would have received inordinate grace and would have become a different person. Unfortunately, you deprived yourself of this blessing by doing your own will."

Henceforth, this disciple never found peace in his soul. He always had thoughts against Saint Paisios and did not trust him. Saint Paisios would send him to venerate the gravesites of holy men, in order for them to speak to him and counsel him. When this

disciple venerated sacred gravesites, the holy ascetics buried there would advise him, "Return to your elder, obey him, trust him, and do not believe your own thoughts."

Even though the saints would speak to him in such a miraculous way,

he, nevertheless, continued doubting his elder until the end of his life. What did it benefit him to have Saint Paisios as his elder, since he did not trust him and did not obey him?

Conversely, in another account of the Fathers, we see a disciple becoming

holy by doing obedience to an elder who was not spiritual. Why this difference? Because one person had trust and obedience, while the other disbelief and disobedience. Many outstanding disciples during the years of the ancient fathers saved their

elders with their great boldness before God.

One such disciple prayed before the throne of God: “O Lord, just as you saved me through this my elder, through the harsh way that he treated me—because this is how Your Providence permitted me to be

trained and to reach this point of being saved and receiving mercy—similarly, have mercy on my elder. Forgive him and bring him here where I am." Christ accepted his petition and saved the elder, because the disciple had boldness and strong prayer. You should do the

same for me as well.

From the above examples, we are instructed and advised the following: When we enter into the struggle of obedience and submission, the thought that must preside over us with the enlightenment of God is, “I have come to

serve Christ and to save my soul. I have come from the world with the enlightenment of God, desiring to devote myself to serve our Christ, out of love for Him. I have come here for no other reason—not even for the elder. Whoever the elder may be, for the love of Christ I

will submit myself and my entire life to serve Christ." When I maintain this potent thought (that, for the love of Christ, I will be patient, I will do obedience, and I will complete my life according to the will of my elder), even if enemy thoughts come to tell me

something bad about my elder, I will be able to respond, “I see Christ in the face of my Geronda. He is not Christ, but in this person’s face I see Christ, to Whom I will do obedience; regardless of who he is as a human being, regardless of his sins, regardless of his

passions and his virtues. I took great care to find a God-fearing elder to lead me to Christ. Consequently, the thoughts I have against him are unwarranted, because I did not come to obey an idol of holiness; rather, I found an elder, a representative of Christ,

in order to serve Christ. Hence, these thoughts have no place.”

This is precisely what took place in one monastery, where there lived a very good disciple. The other monks would make fun of him, they would bother him, they would wound him

with their words, with their gestures, with their conduct, and they would put him in a very difficult position. During these moments, the evil demon would find fertile ground to tell him, “Leave! These people here are not monks. They are barbarians. Go

somewhere else; go look for another elder, so you can find peace."

But a bright angel would also come to advise him, "For the love of Christ, be patient!" He would take hold of this thought, go somewhere private, meditate on it, and then conclude, "I

have come here for the love of Christ. I did not come for the elder or for the brothers. No matter who they are, I will be patient. Done!" In order to remember this well, he wrote it down on a small piece of paper and placed it in his pocket. Day after day, the fathers would

harass him in the same way. Each time he would find himself in a difficult position, he would go somewhere private, take the piece of paper out of his pocket and read the following words: “For the love of Christ, I will be patient unto death.” He would remind himself, “I

have made a pledge to Christ to live with obedience and patience in the monastery unto death."

Every time he read this note, he received tremendous strength, as if he had been given a revitalizing spiritual injection. It would

provide his soul and his entire spiritual being with a boost of fortitude, helping him to endure patiently the harshness of the brothers.

When the brothers noticed him withdrawing and later returning with renewed patience and courage, they presumed

that he was performing some type of magic that would give him strength.

So they went and informed the elder: “Geronda! You know brother so and so, whom we tease and mock? Whenever he starts feeling uneasy, he goes off somewhere alone and

then returns full of peace, tranquility, and courage. We believe he is performing some type of magic on himself."

The elder knew that the disciple in question was a courageous and virtuous man, and that it was not possible for him to be involved with

magic. So he decided to do the following. One day he ordered his disciple to carry out a hard, labor-intensive job. After digging for several hours and having become exhausted, the elder instructed him, “My child, go to rest right now, just as you are.” As

a good disciple, this monk went to rest like his elder told him, without praying. He was so tired and exhausted that he immediately fell sound asleep.

Meanwhile, the elder kept a close eye on him, and during the night he quietly approached the

sleeping monk, unbuttoned his pocket, and slipped out the little paper. He unfolded it carefully, read what was written on it, placed it back in the monk's pocket, buttoned it up and left.

The next day, the elder summoned all the

monks and announced to them, “Fathers, the time has come for this brother’s sorcery to be revealed. Deacon, go and bring the blameworthy brother, and tell everyone to gather here to listen to his magic spells.”

All the fathers, overcome with the envy

and jealousy of the devil, awaited anxiously. In the meantime, the brother realizing what was about to take place, attempted to avoid the situation. The deacon, however, insisted, “Please proceed. It is the Geronda’s order!”

The good disciple came forward.

“My child, the fathers claim that you perform magic with something that you have in your pocket. Please remove what you have in your pocket so we can all see it.”

“I don’t have anything, Geronda.”

“No! You do have

something there. Take it out, now!”

“I only have this small piece of paper. Nothing else.”

“Deacon. Take the note and read it.”

The deacon ascended the pulpit and read it aloud: “For the love of Christ, I will be obedient

and patient unto death."

As soon as the culpable monks heard these words, they were left dumbfounded. They remained speechless, they were aghast, and their conscience began eating away at them! "What were we doing? Whom were we bothering?

Whom were we slandering?…”

The elder then took the stand and declared, “My fathers, you have been deceived. You have slandered your brother unjustly. Kneel down and ask for forgiveness. And next time, be exceedingly careful. You should

examine things first before making accusations.”

This is an exquisite and bright example of patience and obedience. For this reason, when the evil demon gives us thoughts against the elder or our brothers, we should respond firmly: “No! For

the love of Christ I abandoned the world, my youth, my parents, my freedom, a promising career, and I came to the monastery in order to serve my Christ and to save my soul. I will be patient and obedient, and say ‘Forgive me,’ and ‘May it be blessed.’ I will

love my brothers, I will not criticize them, I will not slander them, and I will not complain about anything, but I will always accept that I am to blame for everything. My evil thoughts are due to my extreme pride, and my massive and preposterous egotism. All these

thoughts arise from my pride and egotism. If a brother rebukes me, God has allowed him to become the cauterizing instrument for my egotism. God sent him to cauterize the egotism and pride that plague me."

Pride and egotism are terrible and chronic

illnesses. They are two great evils that entangle the heart of every person, young and old, constantly creating pain and suffering for us daily.

Do we feel hurt when a brother teases us, when he speaks rudely to us, or when we have suspicions against him? This thorn

pricked us and struck the wound, from where the pain arose, from where the sorrow and protest originates. If we did not have the tender wound of pride and egotism, we would not feel pain. Rather, we would proclaim that blessed is the mouth of the brother

who directed these words against us or who slandered us. In this manner, we would increase in humility.

In the monastery, the opportunities for spiritual progress are endless each day. We may be walking along the road and cross paths with another

brother, at which time we may have the thought, “My brother didn’t even bother to look at me, he didn’t even speak to me. The look on his face tells me that he has something against me.” Or we may think, “I heard that he badmouthed me.” Immediately we are

bothered, and our thoughts protest that the other brother is wrong, prideful, and so many other things.

All the above can be pushed aside and tossed out with the following thought: “It’s OK. May it be blessed. I deserve it. For the love of Christ my

pride must be humbled, my ego must be crushed." By waging this war and resisting internally, therapy takes place in the heart. Every time we resist, a small rootlet with a thorn is uprooted. When, for the love of Christ, we uproot the thorn that is embedded in

the heart, the heart feels pain, because we are opposing the passion. But this pain is therapeutic. If we do not feel pain, if we do not resist, the heart will not be healed.

This is why as the years go by, and, as we approach old age, the passions and wounds

remain nestled within us. As the saying goes, “When you see an old man, who is either virtuous or evil, this is how he was in his youth as well.” Also, the Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers teach, “Good and bad habits grow old and die

with man." This is indeed how things are. We take both things with us. Do you desire a fruitful old age with a good spiritual state and a courageous conscience with boldness before the Lord? Work on your heart now, uproot the roots of sin today, and tomorrow your heart will

be free from these things and will contain within itself only dispassion and the grace of God.

When we continuously look after a field, we uproot the thorns, we remove the rocks and the thistles. The more we clear the field, the greater the potential

for a fruitful yield. Of course, we will feel pain now, but this pain will turn into joy. When others accuse us and slander us, of course we will pity them for being found in such a state, but we will not feel pain. We will bless them, we will forgive them with all our

heart, and we will view them as the cause of benefit and fruitfulness. The end result of this blessing from others will be the alleviation of our sins, relief from passions, and unobstructed entry into Paradise.

When the time comes for our soul to leave the

body, each soul will have the characteristics of either God or the devil. If it possesses the characteristic virtues of God, then it will enter into His Kingdom. Conversely, if it possesses the characteristic passions and sins of the devil, then

it will go to his side. For this reason, we must work on improving our character in order to acquire the provisions that will help us pass into the next world.

Therefore, my blessed children, we are obligated as disciples to attend diligently to our

obedience. We must push away every opposing thought and make the following definitive and decisive resolution: “Since I submitted myself for the love of Christ, I will obey and be patient.” We should drive away thoughts against our elder and our brothers. We are

obligated to display love and patience toward our brothers. When we love, we do not condemn, we do not think of the evil that was done to us, we are not scandalized, we do not become suspicious. Being patient in this manner, we proceed with hope toward eternal life.

Each disciple must pay close attention to blind obedience and conscientiously fulfilling his work assignment. We should not neglect our work. Indifference toward our job means disobedience to the will of God, and, according to the Scriptures, “Cursed is

he who does the work of God with indifference" (Jer. 31:10). When we are instructed, for example, to do something and we do not do it, then we are in disobedience.

We must continuously remember these two phrases: "Forgive me," and "May it be blessed."

We must increase our level of obedience because, unfortunately, it is at an all-time low. We lose sight of our purpose, and we forget why we came here. This is why we talk back, argue, and disobey. All these indicate that our level of obedience has

diminished. We should make every type of sacrifice in order to wage war against back talk, quarreling, and the desire to fulfill our own will.

The renowned Saint Moses was once a notorious thief. When the mercy of God overshadowed him,

however, he was enlightened, he became an ascetic, and later the abbot of many brothers. This saint would give the following advice: “My children, run to wherever there is obedience. This is where love exists, where progress is found, where the grace of God dwells,

where dispassion is present, where salvation is assured.”

Many times we turn this very effortless and fruitful path into a difficult, uphill, and taxing road because we put forth our own will and not the will of Christ through the elder.

Oftentimes behind a blessing that we seek to acquire there lurks our own will. We receive a blessing for five degrees, and we turn it into fifty or one hundred degrees. Thus we negate the blessing, even though we may have a deluded and sick sense of satisfaction

for, supposedly, receiving a blessing. But, is this obedience?

The sleepless eye of God sees everything from above. He does not look at what was said externally, but what the disciple had in mind and how he acted subsequently. God

examines in depth, not only superficially, and He responds accordingly. We may be able to trick the elder, because he is a human being—but God, never! We must be sincere in our obedience. Other times, our thoughts deceive us by suggesting, "As soon as the elder

leaves, I will ask for a blessing from the person who will be left in charge because I know he will let me do it, whereas now that the elder is here, I will not get my way." Is this sincerity in the eyes of God? When I scheme to ask for one thing with the intent of gaining

something else, God sees this, and He will not give His blessing. Things will not have a good ending. The elder will not repay us for our obedience. It is God Who will either reward or punish us. If truthfulness and sincerity do not characterize our obedience, at the end of

our lives we will be found deficient and meet harsh reproval from our conscience.

For this reason, my children, try with all your might to remain correctly within obedience. Do not allow the devil to deceive you, and do not accept idiorrhythmic thoughts of

unbelief and disobedience. All of you should do as you are advised, whatever is suggested; the gain will be yours and no one else's. This place is a school, and each person will be graded and will enter freely into the Kingdom of God

according to how he applies himself to studying the various courses, with obedience as the foundation. Amen.

Homily 27

Obedience and the Spiritual Struggle

My fathers,

Some time ago, one of my spiritual children challenged me on a certain issue, and without question he saddened me. The following day he came and asked for forgiveness with much repentance and pain, and

I, of course, forgave him with all my heart.

"Geronda," he confessed, "I have to tell you something. After upsetting you, I went to rest. I had not fallen asleep yet, when—I don't know how—I found myself before sacred Golgotha. There I saw

Christ on the Cross. He was nailed to the Cross exactly life-size, very alive, and blood was running from His wounds. As soon as I saw Christ on the Cross, I began making prostrations, asking Him with repentance and love to forgive all my sins. I

looked to see how He would respond to my supplication. I wanted to see the expression on His face, to get an idea of what Christ thinks of me: does He consider me very sinful, or not so sinful; am I forgiven, or not forgiven. Thus, as I was making prostrations and

looking at Him, He motioned to me with His eyes to look to His right. When I did so, I saw you, Geronda, standing there. Then Christ said, 'If he, your spiritual father, who is My servant and My mouth, does not forgive you, I will not forgive you either! Your forgiveness

will come through him.' I then continued making prostrations and weeping, and He repeated, 'Only through him will you be forgiven.'"

When I recovered from this event, I was overcome by painful regret and repentance! I wanted at that very

moment—if it were possible—to fall at your feet and beg for forgiveness. Right now I am experiencing a beautiful state within my soul! This is the way I felt when I first came to the monastery, when I first met you, when I experienced the initial

grace near you.”

What he related to me was not a dream, but clearly a vision. Proof of this was the grace of God that was plainly visible on his face. Grace was evident all over him. This was a further indication that he had seen a true vision and not a dream.

Afterwards, this monk certainly repented and changed. A saying of Saint John Climacos comes to my mind, pertinent to what this young man experienced: “When a disciple saddens God, the disciple has his spiritual father as a mediator who beseeches

God, and God forgives him for the mistake he made. But if he saddens his spiritual father, who will intercede to God for him to be forgiven?”[70]

The disciples of old were very careful never to sadden their spiritual guide because they always kept in mind that

this would definitely place a serious obstacle on the path of their spiritual journey and prevent them from advancing to union with God.

Since the spiritual guide is the mediator and the spiritual Moses who intercedes before God

(for both his disciple's forgiveness and progress), when a disciple saddens his guide with a transgression, a wall of separation is erected, which impedes God's blessings from reaching the disciple. When a barrier is created between the spiritual father and

the disciple, unless it is torn down, the rays of divine light will not travel and reach the disciple; consequently, he does not receive enlightenment.

The fathers of the past tried to avoid saddening not only their elder, whom they held in very high esteem, but even

their brothers. They firmly believed that if someone saddened his brother, he saddened God.

This was the case with a certain elder who was once traveling with other brothers at night. Their guide was a monk who knew the way to their destination. They avoided

journeying during the day because it was too hot, and chose to travel at night when it was cooler. After walking quite a distance, the brothers realized that their guide had made a mistake and that they were no longer on the right path. As a result, the monks said to

the elder, “Geronda, it looks like we’re headed in the wrong direction.”

“I realized this as well, my children. But let’s be patient so we do not sadden our brother. I’ll pretend that I’m tired. I’ll tell him that I can’t walk any further, and we will stop for tonight.

When the sun rises in the morning, the brother will realize on his own that he made a mistake. In this way, we will not sadden him."

This is what he said to their guide, and so they stopped at that spot overnight. In the morning when the sun came out,

the brother who was guiding them realized that he had taken the wrong path, and he made a prostration to the elder: “Forgive me Geronda. I made a mistake.”

“Don’t worry my child. We’re all human and we all make mistakes.”

In this manner, they did not upset the brother.

An elder is not saddened only when his disciple talks back, argues, and disobeys, but also when his disciple does not lead a proper spiritual life. Conversely, he rejoices when his disciple makes spiritual

progress. A mother is saddened when her child is ill, and she tries to make him well. Something similar occurs with the spiritual father when his disciple is not doing well. He is grieved, he prays, and he makes every possible effort to heal his disciple.

As I have told you in the past, when I first came to Mount Athos as a young novice, my elder would frequently give me advice. Among other things, he would tell me, “My child, the fathers of old here on Mount Athos would tell us that if a disciple gives rest to his

Geronda, he has made God content. If he does not give rest to his Geronda with his life in general, then he has not made God content either."[71]

I held on to this very small, yet immensely powerful, piece of advice

within my soul, and I made it my principle and my possession. I told myself, “This will be my goal in life. Since this recommendation is so useful, with God’s help and Geronda’s blessing, I will try to never sadden him as long as I live, and I will try to please him

with my way of life." Thus, I tried twice as hard to give rest to my elder. God knows to what extent I did not sadden him and how much I made him content. I have seen that when a disciple attempts to keep his elder's commandments and orders, God's blessings

lead the way for him.

It is not possible for a disciple, who, with humility, has given rest to his spiritual father, to fail in the spiritual life and not acquire the Kingdom of God. It is inherently impossible. And when we say inherently impossible, we mean one thousand

percent certain. When the disciple asks for guidance and then attempts to apply the advice he receives, it is impossible for him not to succeed and not to find the grace of God.

Through his complete obedience, perfect faith, and the life-giving power

of humility, Saint Symeon the New Theologian not only sampled the grace of God, but he was given the grace of the Holy Spirit "by the bucketload." He became the saint whom we all know and was given the title "New Theologian" by our

Church because he received theology directly from above, from the grace of the Holy Spirit. He did not study theology in a classroom, but acquired it by laboring in obedience and devotion.

Since God has called us through His infinite mercy to come here to the

monastery and to wear the honorable monastic raso, we should take advantage of the time we have (now that we are alive) as best possible, so that our soul bears fruit and is filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit. This way of life is full of blessings and great spiritual rest.

Initially, of course, a person must exert himself because he brings with him an entire world of passions, thoughts, images, and the like. A small amount of effort is required in the beginning; however, once the initial difficulty is overcome, God's blessing follows,

and the fruit of all the initial labors begins to blossom. A person then sees the road wide open before him, he is filled with joy, and he rejoices as he sees himself enriched with a wealth of experience acquired during the battles with the devil. The Fathers refer to

this experience as “the second grace” of God.

The first grace is when we feel the love of God and the fruits of the Holy Spirit. But experience constitutes a “second grace” that never disappears, that never fades away, and which remains indelible within a

person's soul. In the beginning we will be tempted. It is quite natural for us to be attacked—this is consistent with the path we have chosen. Ultimately, however, we gain this experience, this second grace, which has enormous value. This

knowledge is not only valuable and beneficial to us personally, but it enables us to help another weak brother, another person who is being battled, or a novice. Other people helped us, did they not? In the same manner, we are also obliged to help others who are being

battled.

Hence we should not find it strange when a war arises or when we are assaulted by temptations. We should realize that the first grace withdraws, it abandons man occasionally in order to test him, and many times a person is brought to his

knees by the unbearable weight of a particular battle or cross. At that time the second grace of experience arrives, as a good Cyrenian (vid. Mk. 15:21), to lift the cross. It does not remove the temptation altogether, but it advises, “Be patient. This battle will also end,

just as the previous one did. Be patient; it is a trial. Don't you remember how much grace God sent you after the earlier temptation ended? This temptation will subside as well; be a little patient. Don't you know that God performs miracles?" This is how the second grace

advises man. Thus, with the knowledge he receives and the courage he obtains from this advice, the temptation becomes lighter. He is strengthened in patience, courage, and faith in God, he finds rest spiritually, and bypasses the difficulty.

We know, through the enlightenment we receive from this "second grace," that it is mandatory for temptations to arise, and for us to be battled by the devil, our passions, and our fellow man. It is a requirement that we be battled. However, we will also struggle; we will also

make an effort. This effort will serve as the cornerstone upon which the beautiful house of God's grace will subsequently be built. Then we will be left with the invaluable experience of the methods, ways, and cunningness with which the devil battles us. If

God does not allow us to be battled, how will we learn this art and science? In time of war, we should be brave and courageous; when we contend with the devil, we should be relentless and crafty. This is what Saint Synkletiki advises us: “The devil is cunning when he battles

us, we should also be cunning when we resist him." When we courageously oppose and repel the devil, we have achieved a victory. From this point onward improvement begins and the door leading to grace and the Kingdom of God opens.

There is nothing wrong with battles. War does not signify disaster. It serves as a wake-up call for us, as an invitation to withstand, be crowned, and have the angels commend us in the next life. Work does not harm an employee; rather, it fills his pockets with

money. If we want to become rich spiritually, we must welcome temptations and see them as a war, as an incentive to fight with the evil demons of passion and weakness, as an opportunity to be victorious and advance with the grace of God. If

we do not overcome a particular passion, it will continue to thrash us for the rest of our life. We will drag it behind us like a piece of filthy garbage. This is why God permits us to be battled: so we can win and be freed from the disgraceful passions that defile our soul. We all

feel and sense the filth of the passion and the devil when we are battled by a passion. Conversely, when someone is liberated, clean, and pure, he senses the fragrance of innocence and purity. Something similar occurs with the clothing we wear. If it is dirty and

smelly, we feel repulsed, uncomfortable, and want to remove it quickly. When, however, it is washed, ironed, and has a fresh, clean scent, we enjoy wearing it and do not want to take it off. This is how we feel spiritually with regard to the passions.

When a person does not exert himself, his life becomes torturous because he suffers from his guilty conscience for yielding to the passions, and he feels discontent within himself. Conversely, when someone struggles, he feels happiness and joy;

he feels that spiritual life truly contains the vitality of divine grace.

We must try to implement the advice, which my elder had given me at the beginning; that is, try as much as possible not to sadden God by disobeying the advice and the commandments that I

have given you. This will be for your own benefit, and for your own great success in Heaven. I have nothing to gain whether you improve or fail. I remain by your side for free, for the love of Christ, simply to help you advance and reach the point of coming to know

God as He is. Teachers receive a salary; thus, they are obligated to teach and endure when their students misbehave. Here in the monastery, however, it is not the same. Everything here takes place for free; everything is for the love of God and the love of our

fellow man. The instructions and advice given are simply to help you overcome the tempter and the passions, and to reach God.

Consequently, it will be highly profitable for you to follow this advice and to firmly resolve, “I must struggle not to

sadden God through my Geronda. I should show my gratitude to God by applying the things I have been advised by my elder, who has assumed a difficult and heavy yoke out of love for God and for us. Let me try to give him rest, so I can make God content, so he can

see me advancing spiritually, so he can see me struggling and battling correctly, despite my passions and weaknesses. Even this will be a great accomplishment."

When a knowledgeable spiritual instructor sees his

disciple struggling, he is positive that once the struggle comes to an end, he will certainly receive the grace of God. It is impossible for him not to receive the grace of God. And to a degree, he also foresees the amount of grace he will receive.

Hence, there is

nothing wrong when we experience attacks. The problem arises when we do not counterattack adequately. We should struggle spiritually, strike the passions, confess sincerely, and conceal nothing within our soul. For things that are concealed become a

wedge that the devil uses to squeeze dynamite into our soul, which he then detonates to collapse man's spiritual edifice. If certain people fell during their spiritual struggle, it was simply because they kept things hidden within themselves. They did not confess sincerely, they

did not make a deep incision within their soul, they did not remove the small rootlets that are deeply entrenched within the heart, and they were not honest before God and their elder. Their way of thinking was flawed, they lost their mind, and this is why they were

shipwrecked and their edifice crumbled.

When a disciple is truthful to his elder with everything, it is not possible for him to fall. He may become dizzy at some point during his struggle, but this is natural. Even our Christ fell to His knees under the

weight of the Cross, but the good Cyrenian appeared to lift it and lighten His load (vid. Lk. 23:26). The same thing happens here. During the struggle, a disciple may slip at some point, become dizzy, and lean momentarily against the wall. At that point in

time, the elder will support him, help him stand back on his feet, throw some cold water on his face to revive him, give him a pat on the back, and offer a word of encouragement, “Keep going. Don’t be afraid.” And behold! Shortly thereafter, the disciple

continues his journey toward the top of the summit.

It is an immense blessing from God when a person discovers and acquires a guide in his life. I can truthfully say, he has found the greatest treasure and security.[72] When someone is

insecure about his objectives, he will not succeed. When someone lacks security in his life, he is in a vulnerable position, and constantly in danger of falling at any moment. Conversely, the person who has security feels assurance. A disciple has security when

he finds a spiritual guide who knows the way, and when he is confident that his guide will also lead him securely to the end. What is the end? When he succeeds in finding God. When someone finds God, he has found everything: he has found infinite and endless

happiness. Conversely, the person who does not know God is miserable.

We are God's children, yet we do not know Who our God is. We have a Heavenly Father and, in reality, we do not know Him. We believe that He is our Father, but our heart does

not acknowledge this and has not tasted this; the eyes of our soul have not seen this Father. If we saw what kind of a Father we have, we would cry out like mad due to the infinite joy of having made such an invaluable discovery. We are the children of an awesome

Father: awesome with respect to riches and gifts. When someone attempts to speak about this Father, he runs out of words. The closer someone comes to a light, the more he begins to lose his vision. Eventually he is blinded by the light and can no longer see anything.

Similarly, as someone draws nearer to God, he begins running out of words and is no longer able to speak about Him. It is a great misfortune for us to have such a Father and yet remain in such spiritual poverty, in such spiritual misery, and not feel His love and

bliss.

Why were we created? God did not create us simply to show that He has the power to create human beings. He brought us into existence so we can share in His bliss and delight in Him. He created blessed creatures to live in happiness. We,

however, strayed from our destiny through our disobedience and have reached the point of being completely unable to recognize our natural Father. Instead, we love so many other things, while not loving God at all. If we loved God, we would keep His

commandments.

The purpose of obedience to the representative of God is to lead securely the disciple to discover God the Father and His utter bliss. Consequently, the value of finding a guide is incalculable. When someone comes to the

realization that God has given him a particular guide whom he still has not been able to appreciate, he feels severely inadequate internally. This realization, nevertheless, will give him the strength to make a new beginning, to wake up, to arise, and

to make an effort to settle unresolved matters, because he does not know the hour and the moment of his departure.

For example, the elder advises, “My child, say the Prayer. Do not forget the name of God at all. Say it, commemorate it. If you are unable to say it

with your mind, say it softly with your mouth in a low voice, so the prayer is heard." You will not understand it in the beginning, your mind will wander here and there, but it is better to repeat the Prayer than to talk idly or to think about other things. The tempter

also hears the prayer. Moreover, it will be quite beneficial for a brother standing next to you, who may possibly be contemplating something inappropriate. For this reason, we should whisper the Prayer as we work or do anything else.

A young lady from

Asia Minor would see her angel standing next to her whenever she would voice the Prayer. When she stopped saying it, she would no longer see him. This motivated her to say the Prayer, and she managed to say it ceaselessly so her angel would always remain by

her side.

Here is one recommendation and obedience from the elder that we can execute, and thus give rest to his soul. This applies to his other counsels as well.

Furthermore, we should ward off our evil thoughts. When Satan

conveys a sinful image of something we have experienced, heard, or seen, whether it be a person, an object, or any other image, and it begins igniting a passion within us, we should expel it immediately. As soon as we notice that this evil artist is attempting to

depict an idolatrous image with his brushes, we should immediately push him away, throw away his brushes and colors, and not give him the chance to paint the sinful picture. Simultaneously, the Prayer “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me” in

conjunction with watchfulness will constitute "the good beginning," so we can lay the good foundation.

Passions originate from the five senses and, subsequently, from man's imagination. Whoever diligently guards and protects his imagination

from sinful images will avoid their detrimental consequences. Henceforth progress begins. When someone purifies his imagination, he is in good standing before God and has shut out the devil. This is why the Watchful Fathers gave their utmost attention to this. The

objective of watchfulness is to cleanse the mind's imagination. Once the mind is cleansed from images and fantasies, it is ready to receive the image of God. When we want to paint a picture, we first clean the canvas or the piece of wood, next we remove any existing

marks, and then we begin to sketch what we want on the blank surface. Similarly, we must first clean our mind—with the help of God's grace—and in following God will provide us with the sketch. Then, through our own personal struggle and in collaboration with

God's help, we will become capable of drawing divine images within our mind and soul.

Let us make an effort, my dear fathers, to struggle a little more. Things are very simple, but a sustained effort is required on our part. God is ready to help us at

every moment. The saints in Heaven are interceding and praying for us because the grace of God guided us to follow their way of life. They also experienced temptations and sorrows; they also had ups and downs during their lifetime. They have enormous experience, and

they realize that we contemporary people are weak and do not struggle properly. This is why they pray for us from above. They beseech God to help us, so that we do not fail to achieve our goal and our purpose.

Since we have the intercessions and prayers

of our saints, let us have faith that God will help us to make a good beginning even now. Amen!

St. Nektarios

Homily 28

Spiritual Zeal

My fathers,

When a sheep dog senses that someone is approaching to harm the

sheep, it howls and barks intensely and menacingly because, to some degree, it feels responsible for the sheep and obligated to its master who feeds it. It is natural and instinctive for a dog to do this. As long as it continues barking and howling, thieves, wolves, and wild

predators will not approach the flock. However, if the dog ever believes that there is nothing to fear, that there is no wolf or thief hiding nearby, then its attention and watchfulness over the flock will begin to diminish, and it will lie down and go to sleep.

Thus, the barking stops, and it is no longer heard among the flock or in the surrounding area. The thieves and wolves take careful notice of this as they patiently lie in wait for the moment the dog ceases barking and keeping close guard. Then, slowly but surely,

they advance, approach, pounce on the flock, and begin to devour the sheep one by one.

Spiritual zeal is like a sheep dog. Within a spiritual person a desire is born to struggle, to acquire virtue, and, in following, to safeguard the virtue. This emerging

desire within the soul, in turn, gives rise to zeal—and when zeal emerges, it barks like a dog. It comes up with various ideas on how to struggle; it makes one think of ways to protect himself from sin and the means to acquire virtue. Ceaseless prayer and watchfulness are then

employed to help acquire the virtue desired by man's soul.

For example, a person reads about ceaseless prayer and, with God's enlightenment, he desires to acquire the gift of ceaseless prayer: the prayer that never stops. Desire, zeal, and fervor

inspire man to strive toward this paramount virtue. Zeal gives rise to thoughts of wakefulness, and man realizes that he must struggle lawfully according to the Fathers. He must continually monitor himself and, initially, he must make an effort to repeat the Prayer

verbally. As he begins to pray with his mouth, zeal will monitor to ensure that the verbal invocation does not stop, that he does not speak idly, that he does not dwell on vain things, that his mind is not scattered in different directions, and that he persistently exerts

himself with a fiery spirit.

As soon as a potential obstacle to the Prayer appears, zeal advises with luminous and fervent thoughts that this hurdle must be overcome. If the Prayer is interrupted by either idle talk or vain thoughts that come to mind, zeal immediately

advises man that he must try harder to prevent this from recurring. As soon as he encounters such an obstacle, he must leap over it and persevere in this virtue of prayer.

Zeal expels every evil thought and enlightens a person with luminous thoughts, which inform

him that if he, indeed, struggles to say the Prayer verbally (as the great Fathers advise), then after the verbal stage he will advance to the higher level of prayer, which is noetic prayer or prayer of the heart. When the soul desires to attain this noetic invocation,

man becomes motivated and determined not to stop repeating the Prayer verbally. Simultaneously, zeal systematically and consistently watches over man as he struggles. It surrounds, envelops, and, in a way, protects him from the devil's malice. Thus, preserved by

spiritual zeal, this holy desire slowly advances toward the acquisition of perfect prayer.

When, however, this zeal begins to die down, our fervent thoughts ice up, we start becoming self-confident internally, and we begin believing that we are doing well.

Subsequently, vain thoughts arise, which assault us and compromise the intensity of the struggle. When zeal diminishes, the soul begins to fall asleep, the mouth ceases saying the Prayer continuously, the Prayer becomes intermittent, man begins

to waver, and he no longer cultivates the Prayer properly. At that point in time, the enemy strips us of the Prayer completely, our mouth remains shut, evil thoughts roam freely within us, empty idle talk shows up accompanied by criticism and

forwardness, and the spiritual flock of the soul is left desolate.

This same correlation exists between spiritual zeal and the other virtues. The more a desire for a virtue is preserved and fueled by zeal, the more this virtue is practiced and becomes a possession

of the soul. We must constantly rekindle our spiritual zeal in order to protect our soul from the noetic wolves that tirelessly wait for an opportunity to leave our soul barren.

Man's body, according to the Apostle Paul, is a temple of God:

“Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (1 Cor. 3:16). The moment we were reborn spiritually through baptism, God’s Holy Spirit entered our hearts, and when we struggle spiritually it remains within us. This

grace of the Holy Spirit, received through Sacred Baptism, renders man's body and soul a temple of God.

When a person is careless and sins, however, this grace becomes buried and submerged deep within the heart. It is entombed,

and its radiance does not illumine the mind. In the absence of its brilliant light, man is incapable of coming to know God within himself; for when the temple of God is not clean, God neither visits it nor remains in it. Rather, He departs and abandons it. Then it

becomes a filthy wasteland. All the demons come and take up residence within it, and, consequently, man is left defenseless, unprotected, unguarded, and barren by the devil.

This is what the demon of evil desire is constantly trying to

achieve. He comes and stands across from us with a lit torch in his hand, eagerly awaiting for an opportune moment (of negligence and indolence, according to the Fathers) to throw it at us, set us ablaze, scorch us, ignite evil desire within us, completely isolate us

from God, set fire to God's temple, and utterly remove any trace of a godly temple or a pure soul.

When, however, spiritual zeal surrounds, patrols, and encircles this temple, barking like a dog, the enemy standing across from us does not

have a chance to burn us, to cripple us, or to render us guilty before God. Thus, we remain clean before Him. Purity of the soul, body, and mind is the fragrance and the beauty of God's temple. "Sanctify, O Lord, them who love the beauty of Thy house."[73] When a

person maintains himself clean, his soul and body become sanctified, and the entire Godhead dwells within him. Then, the grace of the Holy Spirit emerges, it resurfaces and discards all the sinful "garbage" that man had previously accumulated. Then the beams of grace

and the rays of the Holy Spirit light up the mind and render it godly.

When the mind and the soul pray, they ascend to God. They approach Him through divine vision and contemplation, and the temple is censed with the aroma of God's grace. Our works

constitute the aroma, and the fruit of our prayer comprises the fragrant incense. And when a temple is adorned and embellished, when it is censed and made fragrant, then God gladly comes and makes it His dwelling, and He is sacrificed upon the

heart's altar. Then the heart offers doxologies and thanksgiving to God, Who performs this mystery and Who accepts this atoning sacrifice.

As monks, we have, to some extent, more precise knowledge of God's will, and we are taught continuously by our God-

bearing Fathers how we must struggle. Their life, their example, and their counsels have no other purpose than to fuel our zeal, so we can emulate the virtue and grace that they acquired through their struggle.

They were also human beings; they also had

passions and weaknesses. However, they diligently preserved their spiritual zeal. They did not allow it to fall asleep and die. They maintained it wakeful and alert; thus, gradually the temple of their soul and body was sanctified. God dwelled within them, and they

became the Saints of our Church.

Now we are following in their footsteps. We have succeeded them within the wrestling ring; we have adopted their way of life. We—and I first—must emulate their zeal for the law of God. We should be extremely

careful to constantly guard and rekindle our zeal and our desire for purity (of body and soul) each day. We must steadfastly attend to ourselves because we know that the devil persistently and ceaselessly stands across from us brimming with

malice and zeal, completely fueled by his innate obsession to inflict harm upon us. Just as he possesses zeal to harm us, similarly we should have zeal for our salvation. We should resemble him in this regard, even to a small degree, since it is to our advantage. We will be

delivered from Hell; we will escape from being sent to Hell with him. It is in our best interest to reach Heaven. Since the tempter approaches us and circles around us looking for an opportunity and an open door to wound us, our zeal must similarly be

centered around guarding our soul.

We are human beings with many weaknesses and various material needs. Oftentimes they distract us and we sustain damage. It is necessary, therefore, to constantly preserve our zeal—even though it is negligible in

comparison to the zeal of the devil.

The memory of death will intensify our zeal tremendously. When someone considers that he may perhaps die after a few minutes, after an hour, after a day, in a month, or a year, this thought fuels his zeal. It

makes a person careful not to sin, not to think evil, not to speak rudely; essentially, not to do anything bad at all!

We are aware that everything—including all our sins—is known to God, but also to the devil. The tempter records all our works, all our

thoughts,[74] and all our words in detail in his ledger. Thus, either during the final moment of our departure or as we make our ascent toward God, the associated toll-houses will present to us the multitude of our sins, which we have forgotten.

When we see them all recorded and we are given the opportunity to recall them, we will be shocked by the vast number of sins the demons have systematically documented.

Then, of course, we will come to our senses. Then we will think

maturely and correctly. But what good will it do us? We will certainly feel enormous regret; regret, however, at that time will no longer be helpful, it will not result in repentance. Repentance will have absolutely no value at that time, because the fair of life

will have come to a close. Time for repentance no longer exists then, and danger for the soul is imminent.

When zeal reminds us of all these things, the soul is protected from evil. For this reason, zeal must restrain us, thereby allowing us to maintain

ceaseless attentiveness. We should always remain vigilant—and I first—because I have more and greater responsibility; perhaps because I also have more knowledge. Thus, I will give a more exacting account to God.

Let us try now, my fathers, to maintain our

zeal lit, unremitting, and sleepless, in order to live carefully, in order to guard and preserve God's temple, so that He can dwell within it. When we have God within us, all things operate properly: Then our journey is toward the light, toward the Heavenly gate, and

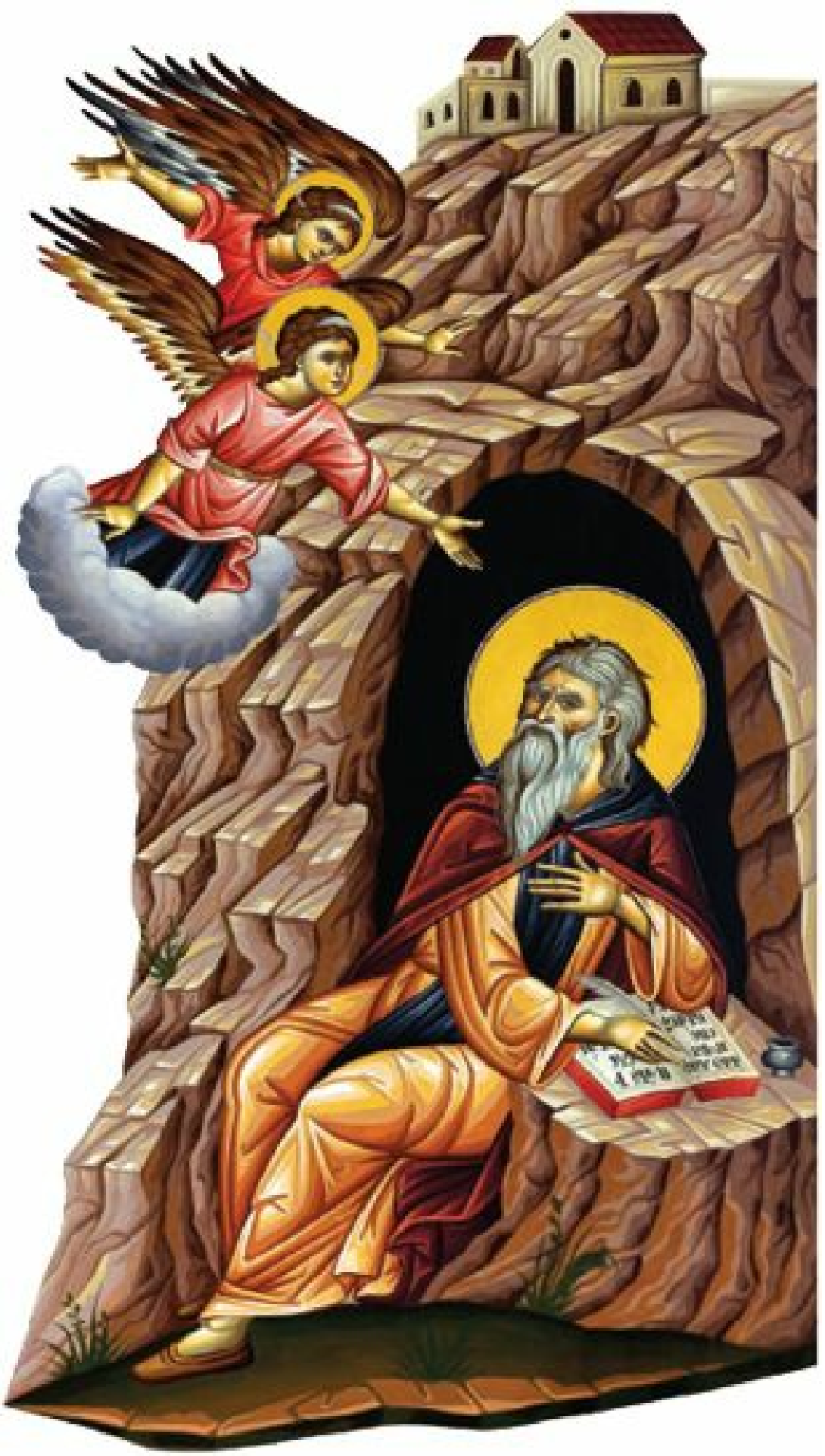
our hope in God gives us rest and refreshment.

Let us struggle, therefore, in this manner, and let us trust that God will help us and accept this good desire of our soul. Let us hope that He will deem us worthy of reaching our great homeland in Heaven: the

Jerusalem above, the Church of the firstborn (cf. Heb. 12:23), where the uncreated Light exists. Up there, the entire Kingdom of God serves as His Heavenly Temple. The light and sun Who illumines this Temple is God Himself. The congregation of this

Heavenly Temple is comprised of saved souls who struggled and passed through the furnace of sorrows on the earth, and who are now resting above freed from sorrows, temptations, sighs, struggles, tears, and fear unto the ages of ages. May we also be deemed

worthy of being found amidst this congregation eternally. Amen.



St. John Climacos

Homily 29

Confronting Temptations

My fathers,

Every person, every

Orthodox Christian approaches God and draws near to Him after he has been tested first through “fire and water” (Ps. 65:12). If a Christian does not pass through a furnace, he cannot arrive at refreshment. This is why our good God, Who “examines the hearts and

reins" (Ps. 7:9) knows very well what type of passions, gifts, and dispositions each one of us hides within the depth of our heart, and He intervenes accordingly—usually with bitter medicine. Oftentimes He intervenes with a real crucifixion, in order to

rebuild us spiritually, restore health to our soul, and render us worthy of passing through the toll-houses easily and reaching the Throne of Grace. As a good Father Who desires to grant true sonship to His children and make them heirs of God and co-heirs of

Christ, He will lead them through a furnace of hard trials. One way or another, everyone will undergo a trial period, as God's judgment sees fit.

God often permits a war to break out, particularly for us monks. He allows the devil to attack us, and He sends us

to battle; however, He does not leave us without grace. He simultaneously comes and invisibly stands beside us. He strengthens the soul, He enlightens man, He instructs him in spiritual warfare, and thus a person engages in combat. During this battle man

will either be crowned a victor or declared a loser.

The number one battle for us is carnal warfare. It begins during our youth. God permits the demon of fornication to subject a person to warfare that may have been previously unknown to him out in the world. A person may have

led a pure life, he may have avoided sin and lived peacefully. God knew that if He had permitted this demon to tempt him out in the world, the person would not have been able to withstand the temptations. At some point, God enlightens

man, He provides him with the initial grace and zeal, He fuels him with the desire and the strength to renounce the world and to come here to the monastery. However, once a person enters the battleground, He subsequently releases the demon of fornication.

God says, “Now fight.” During the battle a monk may reach the point of thinking, “I never had this kind of warfare in the past. How will I be freed now?” God may allow a monk to be battled by other passions as well. A person may erroneously believe that he became

worse here at the monastery than he was in the world, where he had no warfare and fewer temptations. Even though a monk may have such thoughts (that he was better off in the world instead of here at the monastery), this is not the case. Here, God released

the demon and set him loose to battle you. Why? In order to render you a warrior and a martyr, so that you can rightfully receive a crown. This is why it has been said, “If people knew how many temptations a monk is confronted with, no one would become a monk.”

But the converse is also true: if people were aware of the glory that monks will acquire in the next life, everyone would become a monastic.

According to Saint Isaac the Syrian, God does not want unwise, brainless, and inexperienced “dummies”

in the next life, but wise people: not wise in a secular sense, but wise in the warfare against the demons, against the world, and against their own selves. A person must fight like a warrior. During this complex war he learns the art of arts and the science of

sciences; he becomes wise, and graduates with a diploma in godly wisdom. Thus, he ascends and becomes an heir of the kingdom. An heir of which kingdom? Not an earthly or corrupt one, but of the eternal and incorrupt Kingdom.

There were many

simple people, especially in the old days of the early Fathers, who did not graduate from universities or educational institutions. Saint Anthony the Great was illiterate, but spiritually he was a gifted university graduate who ranked first amongst the

ascetics because he acquired godly wisdom. In order for us to receive a diploma from God, we must take part in various battles and enroll in many courses. Schoolchildren have various classes (such as math, chemistry, physics, etc.), and they must be examined in

every subject in order to pass the grade. Similarly, each one of us is presently taking exams in order to establish our grade and the diploma we will receive.

We as monks are not in need of worldly philosophies and teachings. We need to

learn how to wage war against the enemy. Our concern is how to confront our thoughts and our imagination, how to oppose various sinful images, and how to adhere to the commandments of the Holy Gospel as faithfully as possible.

Even though we have come here to the monastery to do all of this, the body still has a need to eat, to sleep, and to be clothed. Furthermore, it has an innate desire for propagation of the human race, as all the animals do: “Be fruitful and

multiply" (Gen. 1:22), say the Scriptures. Thus, nature revolts and seeks the things related to her: it desires her own things, and her own satisfaction. This warfare is natural, since the desire is sown within man's nature. The devil also comes to complicate matters. He

gets behind the steering wheel in our mind and our thoughts; he presents various sinful images to us; he pressures us; he makes matters worse for us. What must we do in this case? It is necessary to cleanse our heart. Christ and the Fathers teach us, “Out of the heart

proceed evil thoughts" (Mt. 15:19). Indeed, all evils spring from the heart. Abba Poimen teaches that our heart is full of thorny roots: "And whoever desires to remove these thorny rootlets bleeds and hurts." If the heart does not hemorrhage and feel pain,

according to the teaching of the Fathers, man will not be cured.

God, the physician, takes hold of the forceps, so to speak, and pulls out the roots, one by one. As He uproots them, the heart aches and spills blood. Whoever patiently endures this painful

surgical procedure that is performed by God will, one day, become healthy. In this manner, the heart (through human effort and aided by grace) will no longer desire impure and vile things. Conversely, when a person is not willing to undergo this medical

procedure, when he refuses to endure the pain associated with the removal of the roots and does not patiently remain motionless as required during the surgery, he will remain full of passions.

According to the Fathers, who can boast

that he has preserved his heart immaculate? No one! Saint Basil declared, "I have not known a woman, and yet I am not a virgin." Of course, he was referring to carnal warfare, to the sensual battle of the imagination, to lustful dreams during sleep, etc. All theses

things constitute a carnal sensation in the heart; consequently, even though he had not come to know the opposite gender, his heart was not completely chaste.

On the one hand, we must resist evil fantasies and struggle to obliterate them before they give

birth to unclean thoughts. On the other hand, through fasting (in accordance to our strength) and abstinence, with our prostrations and prayer rule, with our toil and effort during the day at work and during the night with vigil, we demonstrate our

disposition to God: we show Him that we desire to be cleansed, to be purified, and to become holy. Not that these attempts in themselves will result in holiness; rather, through them we collaborate with God in the process of our purification. “We are

God's fellow workers" (1 Cor. 3:9). We work together with God to purify our heart.

When our heart is unclean, our actions, our eyes, our thoughts, our movements, and everything we do will also be unclean. All our bodily actions originate

from the heart. The heart externalizes through the bodily members whatever is contained within it. This is how lustful dreams arise. The devil presents images to us in our sleep in order to summon them back to our mind as soon as we wake up, and thus precipitate a

battle during the day as well. What must we do in this situation? We must disregard the lustful dream as nothing, aiming not to recall all the dirt that the devil presented to us during sleep.

We should struggle correspondingly against our imagination. Do

images come to mind? We must erase them with a sponge. Do they return defiantly? Erase them again. However, if we do not struggle accordingly, they begin to affect us, they start to take root within us, and they gain strength. Subsequently, every time a fantasy that

defeated us in previous battles reappears, it proclaims, “I’m back! Now I’m going to pin you to the ground.” It is similar to a young child who has been defeated several times: as soon as he sees his opponent, he cannot face up to him and he runs away because his

self-confidence has been shattered from the previous losses. When this happens to the soul, it becomes paralyzed as soon as an evil image emerges, then it surrenders, and, subsequently, it cannot think straight.

Thus, we must be

fully armed, wide-awake, alert, and on guard, ready to destroy sinful images as soon as they appear. After a few successful confrontations, the enemy will begin to suffer defeat each time he returns to wage war. Thus, when the inside of the cup becomes clean, the outside will

also become clean, according to the Holy Gospel (vid. Mt. 23:26).

A certain elder expelled high-ranking demons (“commanders”) and disarmed them with ease. Astonished, his disciple asked, “Geronda, why do the demons fear you and flee?”

He replied, “My child, I have not done anything great; it is the grace of God. The only thing I can tell you is that throughout my entire life I was battled in my imagination by evil thoughts; however, with the grace of God sinful images never overpowered me:

they never defeated me. Not only did I never consent to the thoughts, I never even entertained them. Since the demons were never victorious, now they are defeated; now they are afraid; now they are immediately disarmed and expelled from people.”

By evading sin at the outset, this elder graduated from university with highest honors without having to take any exams.

This is the case with the various other passions as well, such as envy, jealousy, pride, egotism, criticism, idle talk, etc.

What is needed? Watchfulness! For example, our thoughts tell us, “Go strike up a conversation with another brother to unwind.” But if I go and begin speaking to him, I will mention something that I shouldn’t mention, I will hear something that I

shouldn’t hear, and I will suffer harm internally. I will become entangled instead of unwinding; I will sustain injuries by submitting. However, when I resist by reasoning, “What will I gain if I sit down and start speaking? My intention is to unwind, but I will end

up harming my brother," and subsequently restrain myself from speaking, I can say the Jesus Prayer a few times instead. When I restrain myself from going to speak, I have won; whereas if I had proceeded to start speaking, I would have been defeated. Today we

suffer one loss, tomorrow another; thus man becomes progressively more passionate.

The same occurs with the passion of pride. Our thoughts advise us that we are "somebody," that we have a certain gift, and the like. When various thoughts make my head

swell, I must resist. I must respond by reminding myself that I am nothing more than dirt and clay. This is my nature; this is my honor. What happens to clay and dirt? Everyone steps on it: both people and animals! This is what you are, so do not speak. “What do

you have which you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" (1 Cor. 4:7). Whatever you possess, from where did you receive it? From your own self? No! Then why do you think you are something? You are

nothing! Time has proven again and again that you have been fooled and have made many mistakes! God has given you a drop of grace and you thought of something beautiful, or you said a few beneficial words, or you showed compassion through alms, or you

helped someone. But, truly, what is so great about this? What did Christ do for you? God descended from the heavens to the earth, and He became man: “He lowered the Heavens and descended” (Ps. 18:9). He received flesh, He humbled Himself, and He

endured the ridicule and evil of men.

"My child," a certain elder asked his disciple, "who crucified Christ?"

"The Jews," responded the disciple.

"No, not the Jews."

"Then who, Geronda?"

"Jealousy and

wickedness crucified Christ! Since Christ performed miracles and all the people were flocking to Him, the Pharisees and scribes, fearing that He would displace them, decided to get rid of Him. Thus they acted murderously."

Even though Judas

was one of the twelve disciples, nevertheless, he also became a traitor. Hadn't he heard Christ's teachings? He certainly heard them, but he had the passion of avarice and did not fight against it. If he had resisted it, he would not have become a traitor. God was aware of

his passion; this is why He handed him the money bag, which contained offerings from people who contributed to the living expenses of the Apostles. Primarily women and people who had been healed from various illnesses helped in this manner. So why

did Christ let him handle the money? So he could not use the excuse, “I was forced to become greedy because my teacher didn’t give me anything, and I was penniless.” With human logic, someone can wrongly conclude that Christ actually helped Judas develop a love for

money by letting him manage the funds, and that's why things turned out like they did. However, this is not so. Christ told him, "Take it; hold on to it. Don't say, 'I was forced to become greedy because I had no money.'" Unfortunately, he used it the wrong way.

He immediately proceeded to the Pharisees and asked, "What will you give me if I hand Him over to you?" "Take thirty pieces of silver," they responded. Thus, Judas gave in and finally betrayed Christ.

We also hand over our soul to the devil when we

do not resist evil. We monks have nothing else to do here other than to fight against our passions. This is why monks who advance spiritually receive crowns and distinction. We have millions of ascetics and monks who succeeded because they were taught

by their elders how to battle the various passions.

One monk asked an elder, “What should I fight against first? All the passions have risen up against me, and I am overwhelmed.”

The elder replied, “No, my child. Things are

not so. The passions do not rise up all together; they rise up one by one. Today you are battled by a certain passion. Fight against it. Tomorrow you will be battled by another passion. Fight against that one as well. As you fight and battle, the passions will slowly be subdued

and you will advance spiritually."

We people of today have the same battles as the fathers of old, because the demons are the same; they have not changed. They come and wage war against us, just as they did with them. The fathers of old, however, were

warriors; they became acclaimed champions. We, unfortunately, are so easily fooled. The demons give us thoughts (for example, against our brother), and we do not oppose them. We sit back and accept them. When someone criticizes us, when someone looks at us

the “wrong” way, when someone does not help us, we begin to weave and fabricate many evil and resentful thoughts against him. And what happens next? We go from bad to worse. What’s more, we waste our valuable time. Meanwhile, the devil, who is quite a craftsman,

rejoices. “No need to bother with this chump,” he snickers. “He’s already wasting his time.” Time passes, and evil begins to take root within us. It will grow and grow, and from a small ant it will turn into a young lion. Finally, it will become a ferocious lion. Eventually, when we

realize that it has gained the upper hand and has a firm grip on us, we will rise to our feet (supposedly to confront it), but we will be shocked to find out that we are up against the strength of a lion. Saint Ephraim the Syrian says, “Have you decided to

wrestle with a lion? Be careful lest he crushes your bones."

Saint Dorotheos teaches, "What does it matter if I say just one word or accept just one thought? True. But one thought will bring the next thought, one image will lead to another

image, and one defeat will give rise to another. Thus, a person gradually becomes passionate."

My children, we are also battled by the same demons; however, we succumb—and I do especially. We give in to evil so easily. If we suspect something about a

brother, we immediately believe it. Hold on! Are you sure this is true? You may insist, “I saw him, or so and so told me.” Fine. But from one mouth to the next, and from one thought to another, things become distorted. Are you aware that a specific demon of suspicion

exists, and that things may not be as they seem?

We witness this with a certain deacon mentioned in *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*. There were two brothers in a monastery. One was a deacon; the other, a monk. One day the monk noticed that the deacon was not his usual

self: he looked upset, distant, and unpleasant.

"Deacon, what's wrong? Did I upset you in any way?" he asked.

"Yes. You scandalized me with such and such a thing you did," replied the deacon.

"I did no such thing. No, I didn't do it."

The monk then went somewhere to be alone and think.

"How did the deacon come up with this? Why did he say this to me?"

The truth was that he had not done anything wrong. So he returned and pleaded with his brother: "Please Deacon, believe

me. Be at peace. Come to your senses! Why are you accusing me of this when I didn't do it? Do you think I would lie to you?"

But the deacon insisted, "You did do it."

Later, the monk, enlightened by God, thought to himself, "Hold on. You have made a ton

of mistakes and have forgotten about them. Maybe you have done this after all and you can't remember, just as with so many other things. You did do it! Case closed! You cannot expel a demon with another demon! Conquer evil with virtue; overcome another

person's pride with your humility. In this manner you yourself will benefit, and you will also help the other person. Go ask the deacon for forgiveness, you wretch."

So he went and knocked on the deacon's door. "Through the prayers of our holy

Fathers . . . .”

When the deacon opened the door, the monk began saying, “Deacon, I must have done it, and I probably forgot about it. You’re right Deacon. Forgive me.”

As he was about to make a prostration, the

deacon exclaimed, “No, no! God revealed and informed me that you didn’t do it, my brother. I was mistaken!”

As soon as one person humbled himself, the other person yielded as well. When both of them maintained their obstinate position, there was no

ensuing benefit.

We contemporary people have not tackled our ego to weaken it even slightly. Consequently, when it swells up in various ways, we become scandalized with each other. Our ego makes thousands of different suggestions in our mind,

next we give in to various passions, and so we all begin to lament and admit that we are not doing well. We have no love, and we do not work together with others in harmony. What type of monks are we? Where will we end up? My beloved children, the cure

is right in front of us. Treatment is available, but we must take the necessary medicine to become well. One medication is bitter, the other tastes sour; one treatment requires incisions with a sharp scalpel, something else is painful! Yes, my children,

but this is how we will become well!

We have the examples of our elders and "grandfathers." I witnessed firsthand how much my own elder struggled. When he was living in his cave, a certain monk lost his patience with him and

threw a plate of food in his face. My elder lowered his head and responded, “Forgive me, father.” Then he prostrated himself before the monk, even though he was not at fault. Behold a champion!

Another time, the following took place at

Katounakia. Close to the cell where my elder lived as a novice (at that time he had a very simple and guileless elder named Father Ephraim), there was a monk living next door who was short-tempered and who frequently caused trouble. One time (I am not sure

what exactly had taken place, it was something trivial concerning a property line or an olive tree—who knows what it was about), this monk started yelling and cursing at Father Ephraim, Father Joseph's elder: "You're a rotten old man, you're a …!"

My elder in those days was a young, strong disciple.

When he witnessed the other monk insulting his elder, he started to boil with egotism and anger. He became furious when he saw that audacious monk verbally abusing his elder, this

little, defenseless old man who had done absolutely nothing wrong. He thought to himself, “If I go out there now, he’s not going to get away from me. He’s finished!” Thus, he went and fell to his knees in the Church and began to restrain his anger. Anger was

advising him, “Go outside and grab him.” However, he fell face down and began crying, “Help me, my Christ. Help me quickly. Lord Jesus Christ, save me. Prevent me from going out there. Help me, my God. Change my feelings and my heart.” As he prayed,

he also watered the ground with his tears.

Once the ground became soaked with tears, his anger and wrath subsided. Then he went outside and spoke to the monk in a sweet and courteous manner: “My dear father, why are you treating the elder this

way? We shouldn't make such a big deal over this. We did not come here to inherit huts, olive trees, and rocks. We came here for our soul; we came here for love. If we lose love, then we have lost God. We will leave these material things behind, but we will take love with

us. We will also take hate with us. What will we gain from quarreling, my dear elder? We have left our parents and so many other things to come here. Are we now going to fight over such trivial things? We will become the laughing stock of all creation!" In this way, he

suppressed the passion.

He would recount to us, “My children, if I had gone out the very moment I was angry, what would I have done? I would have beat him to death! And what would have been the outcome? I would have become an evil person, and all the demons in the

desert would have celebrated! However, because I fell down, prayed, resisted, and choked the anger within me, I came out victorious.”

Each passion needs to be confronted valiantly. If we do so, sooner or later it will withdraw—just as

long as we do not give in when we feel cornered and pressured. Resist, and the passion will withdraw; for he who is attacking you is a demon. He is a personal being with a finite amount of power who has received permission from God to wage war against you—

but only up to a certain point. Once he exhausts the limits that God has conceded to him, one way or another, he will retreat. Then what? Then you will be crowned! As soon as the battle subsides, the grace of God will appear.

I was battled in this manner by various

passions as well. When the warfare stopped and I had peace for a few days, I noticed that I would not ascend spiritually. Sure enough, another war would break out. Time for battle! As soon as the warfare subsided again, the grace of God would return.

What I want to say is that we monks must learn the art of fighting against the passions and the demons. No matter what we learn, how famous we become, how many degrees we acquire, or how many trades we learn, if we do not also become proficient in this

war and succeed internally against the passions and the demons, we will remain insignificant in the eyes of God.

The years are passing, and we will soon depart from this life. We assume we will die when we grow old. However, we might

not grow old and may instead depart from this life at a young age. Therefore, we must always be attentive, we must constantly exert ourselves and cleanse ourselves, in order to gradually draw near to God.

When my elder kept

vigil, he would remain in prayer for hours. When sleep (the "evil demon," as he used to refer to it) would approach, it was not easy for him (as it was for me, the youngster at the time) to get up and walk around outside, on account of his illness and difficulty standing. What

would he do when sleep approached or when he did not find grace through the Jesus Prayer? He would begin to chant hymns from the funeral service; he would meditate on death, on the soul's departure, on Hell; and he would sit and weep. In this manner,

once sleep withdrew and he had become alert, he would "switch gears" and take hold of the Prayer again in his heart, and he would exit his room after seven or eight hours of prayer! This would take place every day!

He would ask me, "My child, do you know

what I do?”

“What do you do, my father?”

“I sit down and take inventory each day.”

“What type of inventory, Elder?”

“I sit and examine myself; I look at my shortcomings. What do I give into? What passion

has a hold on me? My conscience tells me. The compass indicates, 'you are weak here.' And so, I make the resolution to fight against this passion the following day. Another day it will point to something else. I will battle that passion as well. In this manner, as I

fight the various passions, I see a gradual improvement. Our forefathers used to say, ‘Work during your youth, so you can have something in your old age.’”

“What does this mean, Geronda?”

“This is what it

means, my child: now while you are young, fight against the passions; fight against your evil thoughts; fight against the imagination; struggle to fulfill your obedience; exert yourself with things you find difficult; sweat and pray during the night. All these labors and

struggles are ‘work’; they constitute work years. Later, when the body grows weak and no longer has the strength to take up arms, when you are old and have worked during the years that God has allotted for you, then He will give you a pension. Depending on your skill

and position, you will receive an analogous pension. What is this pension? It is the grace of God.

“If you were to ask me now, for example, I will respond, ‘Within me, my child, I feel Paradise. The Prayer runs like clockwork; grace

abounds. I do not sense a single passion active within me. There is not a trace of any passion; I do not experience any warfare; I do not have any evil thoughts; I do not sense any passionate uprising. All these are not recent accomplishments; they are the fruits of my

labors from my youth. That is when everything took place. Now the just reward has come."

A younger monk was experiencing demonic warfare, and he begged, "My God, please deliver me from this battle." God listened to his prayer and freed him. At some point

he visited a renowned and experienced elder who had been through a lot, a true "sea dog," as we say. "Geronda," he announced happily, "I have found rest from the passions."

"What did you say?"

"I have found rest. I am not battled by anything."

The elder then took a good look at him. He stared at him intently and remarked, “You found rest so quickly? You accepted a reduced pension? Big mistake! You asked God on your own for this rest to be given to you. Now go to the fathers and ask them

to pray for you, to beg God to resend the passions to you, so you can fight, ascend spiritually, and receive a full pension one day—not a premature pension!”

Do you understand what this father is trying to tell us? It is not to our advantage to find rest so

early. While we are still in our youth, we need to be exposed to wars and the passions, so we can strike them. When they persist, we must also fight back. Saint Isaac the Syrian says that God intentionally does not fulfill our prayer when we ask to be delivered from

various passions because as we fight back and invoke the name of God, our mind, mouth, and heart are sanctified by the name of Christ. When you are at war, you are forced to pray: “Help me, my Christ. Help me, my Panagia.” This name that you call upon will bring

you holiness.

A certain brother was experiencing torturous carnal warfare. On account of the mental onslaught, he would pace around outside continuously and cry out, “Lord Jesus Christ … Lord Jesus Christ.” His elder, who was a heroic

and experienced warrior asked him, “My child, I see that you are having difficulty. Do you want me to pray for you, so the warfare comes to an end?”

“No, Geronda. Please do not pray for me. Let me remain like this, because I am receiving

enormous benefit."

"May God bless you, my child. You have found the way! This is the path to God. This is what I wanted to hear from you. If you had replied, 'Yes, Geronda, pray for me so the war ends,' you would have ceased weaving your crown. The crown must

be fully adorned with a full range of flowers: carnations, roses, and others. Don't ever think that everything is complete with a few small flowers. Anyone who thinks so is a coward."

What I am trying to say, my children, is that if

we do not learn how to engage in war, we will make no progress. Even if we are educated, even if we read and study, we will accomplish absolutely nothing if we do not learn how to fight against our evil thoughts and fantasies. We should love one another, and we

should sacrifice ourselves for each other. “Even if you do not help me, I will help you.” This is the attitude we should all have. This is the law of the Gospel. If you do not act this way, do not expect to execute the Gospel correctly.

“Did you help me?

You did me a favor? Then I will also do something for you in return. I do this for you, so you can do something else for me." This is not monasticism! Overcome evil with good (cf. Rom. 12:21). Did someone criticize you, or refuse to help you? You should assist him and do

something nice for him. How you conduct yourself is what matters to God. You will not be accountable for other people's actions. You will pay for your own debt. Pay off your own account now, put the Gospel into action, and one day Christ and the Gospel itself will

proclaim your righteousness. What did the Lord declare? “The word that I have spoken, this will judge you on the last day” (Jn. 12:48). You have heard the words of the Gospel, you know what it says, but you give in to evil desires and you do not do what is right. If

you implement the Gospel, then you will be able to proceed and enter into “the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21).

This is what my elder would advise. My sanctified elder, of course, guarded his mouth meticulously. As I have

told you in the past, our brotherhood was made up of living human beings. We saw and heard various things. However, the moment we tried to bring up something that was unrelated to our brotherhood (for example, “You know, Geronda, this happened …”), he would

immediately reply, “In here, you will not bring talk from outside our brotherhood. Here we will concern ourselves with our own issues. You have no business occupying yourselves with what other fathers are doing.”

Father Arsenios, who was an absolutely

guileless and sanctified monk, would mention from time to time, “You know, Geronda, that person is negligent, he wastes his time …”

The elder would immediately reprimand him: “Arsenios, look after Arsenios and leave the other person alone. He

knows how to be saved. You, however, do not know if you will be saved because you open your mouth and criticize."

This is how the elder trained us. This blessed man never spoke ill of anyone. I never heard him utter even one word about another monk. We say a

thousand and one things—and I am first. We receive so much instruction, yet we remain the same. Imagine how much more we would say if we had not been instructed at all!

This is how the holy Fathers labored, advanced, and reached

Heaven. And now the demons cry out that Elder Joseph visits the monasteries and helps. Truly, our grandfather helps us now that he is up above. Do you think that our grandfather is idle? He did not allow himself to rest down here, is it possible for him to sit

still up above? Now that he sees how Paradise is, what Hell is, and how we live down here on earth? Our grandfather walks amongst us and helps us. He has saved us from great evils many times without our realizing from where the help came! This is the type of

intercessor we have in Heaven!

This is why we should ask for our grandfather's blessings. He looks after us. As much as possible, my children, we should adhere to everything our fathers taught us. That is, we should fight against sinful images and evil

thoughts; we should have love amongst ourselves, we should conduct ourselves carefully, we shouldn't judge each other, we shouldn't push each other into sin, we should fulfill our prayer rule and our duties, because one day soon we will die. And we will take

with us upward whatever we have put in our knapsack. Prepare to take good things with you. Pack bread, cheese, fruits, etc. Don’t fill your knapsack with garbage, rubbish, rusted cans, and cardboard. Fill it with valuable goods because you will cross over into

the other world with these items.

So many years have gone by imperceptibly. I am approaching sixty, another person thirty, yet another twenty. What have we accomplished? It is as if we came into this world yesterday, and now we are preparing to depart

for the other life. Behold, diseases! Behold, cancers! We will all depart one after another. Behold, Father Ephraim of blessed memory died when he was forty. I was advising him and relating various accounts that would have been useful to him later in life. I would

inform him that I will leave, I will do this and the other thing. I advised him to avoid certain things and to correct other things. I counseled him. He used to be here; he used to sit right there! Wasn't he here amongst us? Didn't he chant for us? Didn't he perform the

Liturgy for us? Is he here now? No. He left. Now his body is decomposing in the grave, and his precious soul is in Heaven. He would speak just like I am speaking right now, and yet he left. This is the truth. Our priest left this life and I stayed behind. Do you

perhaps think that our priest doesn't help us now? He helps us, just as all the fathers who have left from this life. You are aware of how many automobile accidents take place and how many of our monks escaped danger! Both a father from our monastery and a

father from Xeropotamou monastery recently escaped death! Who knows which prayers and which Saint helped them escape!

Are you aware of how many young children leave this life? The same can happen to us. As we are walking up the steps,

suddenly we can slip, fall down the staircase headfirst, and die on the spot. Case closed! When we leave the monastery to go somewhere, are we certain that we will return? After getting into a car, as you're driving along, suddenly you're in a collision and you die

instantly. A couple of days ago, a district attorney and his wife drove off a cliff and fell into the ocean with their vehicle from a height of twenty meters, and they were carried off to the hospital in critical condition. Perhaps they were on their way to

enjoy themselves, but look where they ended up. Life comes to an end before you know it. What significance do the words "young" and "old" have? Once God decides to take you, He will take you! Even if you take all the possible precautions, He will still take you "in the

blink of an eye." Certain people are involved in serious accidents and survive, while others don't. Take Father Ephraim for example. If you saw the vehicle, you would have wondered, "How could a person possibly have been killed in this car that is barely

damaged?" And yet, he died in the worst possible manner. There are other instances where vehicles were crushed to pieces and people came out alive. What does this indicate? That the person's time has not come yet. There is no way that a person will leave

this life if God does not send the messenger from above; that is, if the Archangel does not come. Therefore, our life is in God's hands. It is not a matter of age; it is a decision entirely up to God.

Since we do not know when He will make the

decision, we should always bear this in mind. We will die one day. But where will we go? I wonder about myself also. You poor man! Don't you understand that you will depart soon? Once you leave, where will you go? To the next life. Will you be able to come back?

No! Does the next life end? No! Are you going to be judged? Yes! Then why don't you put things in order now? Why don't you prepare yourself appropriately so you can pass into the other world where you will live eternally? Here you concern yourself with

your health, and with so many other “important” things. You are concerned with everything, except your soul. Why? It is a combination of both human weakness as well as the devil. Our desires lead us astray, and we lose focus of preparing ourselves with

determination. Accept the fact that you are departing from this life and leaving the world behind. If your heart stops beating, your life is over! Within minutes you will depart from this world. You will set out for good! “Well … I didn’t know I would leave so early.” Really?

You didn't know this? You hadn't read about this? You never noticed people dying and leaving this world? You never heard of car accidents? All these things are a reality, my children.

God will condemn us, and me first, because I do not practice what I

preach. We speak of these things, we believe them, but we live as if they are not true, as if they are only an idea, simply a philosopher's hypothesis and empty words. Nevertheless, they are truths that will certainly take place. If we digest this truth, our life will

change! Then we will become highly attentive and concerned!

This is the concept we must fully grasp. We must watch over ourselves and wonder, “Could it be that I won’t wake up in the morning?” When the sun rises, we must think, “Will I make

it to the evening? Let me do something good even on this final day of my life." Did an evil thought come to mind? I should resist it immediately. Why should I allow it to linger? I should repel it. A thought comes and suggests, "Go speak." Why should I start

speaking for no reason? Instead of babbling five meaningless words, I can say the Jesus Prayer five times.

When God decides to lay you to rest, the demons will arrive, and then you will realize the great mistake you have made. However, it will be

too late! Your life will have come to a close; the Lord will take you. This is where the deception finally ends. While asleep, you may dream that you are a commando engaged in combat, you are conquering foreign lands, giving orders, accomplishing

remarkable feats … . But when you wake up, you realize that you are just a monk. This is what will happen to us then. We will wake up in the next life, and we will pass into the other world. Done! Life ends. We fail to grasp this with our mind. The Scriptures state that

“every man is a liar” (Ps. 115:2), not because he speaks lies, but because he himself is a lie.

May God have mercy on us and forgive us for everything we do. We should beseech God day and night and cry out, “I have sinned!” When we make a mistake, we

should lift our eyes and beg Him, “Forgive me, I have erred.” Then we should run to our spiritual father to confess, so that the sin disappears and no longer remains within us. If we fall again, we should repeat the same words and proceed to obliterate it once more. If

we act in this manner, then we will enter into the Kingdom of God. Up above exists rest. There is no sorrow, no pain, no sigh, but eternal life. “The Lord God shall remove every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 7:17). Eternal life! Rest within the light of God! Within the

uncreated light of God, as an angel,[75] you will chant the Thrice-holy Hymn. Everything up there exists in peace. The assurance that you have entered into the Kingdom of God and that you will no longer experience sorrow or suffering unto the ages of ages, alone,

suffices.

Since we have come here in order to enter into this Paradise, we should continuously aim in this direction. We are human beings. When we fall, we should get up. We should not submit to despair and hopelessness. These are from the devil. With

hope, one day we will manage to overcome the devil and proceed to the Kingdom of God. To Him is due all glory and power, unto the ages of ages. Amen

Homily 30

Humble by Nature

Our Christ has allowed us once again this year to

celebrate the great and light-bearing day of His Resurrection: "Pascha, the Lord's Pascha."

Pascha is translated as "passing." The human race received the grace and blessing from God to ascend from the earth to Heaven; to pass from transient death into

eternal life. Our Christ was infinitely merciful to us. He felt sorry for us and came down to our earth in order to raise us to Heaven.

Every year we celebrate Holy Pascha. Every year we all eagerly anticipate it, so we can once again feel the

special joy and light of the Divine Resurrection within our souls; in order to taste a "small sample" of the endless jubilation of the eternal Pascha; to get a glimpse of the light that illumines the other world; to experience a tiny bit of the eternal blessedness that is felt in

Heaven above by the souls who already have the privilege of being saved and who now celebrate the never-ending, eternal Pascha.

To truly feel Pascha and to actually see the light of the Divine Resurrection, we must purify our senses from

every sinful feeling and desire: “Let us purify our senses and we shall behold Christ, radiant with the unapproachable light of the Resurrection, and we shall hear Him say, ‘Rejoice!’” says the hymnologist.

If the heart has not been purified, if it has not

been freed from appalling egotism and prideful dispositions, and if the humility of Christ has not become established within it, the light of the Resurrection cannot be seen by the soul's eyes and cannot be sensed by the heart. Our Christ showed us the path to

purification: “Learn from Me, that I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt. 11:29). If we do not humble our mindset, if we do not bow our head, and if we do not wholeheartedly believe that we are a zero (that we are the worst human, the

most sinful person, the one who will go to Hell), we will never feel the special joy of the Holy Resurrection, and we will not be able to celebrate Christ's Pascha mystically and secretly within our heart.

"Every prideful person is unclean before

the Lord" (Pr. 16:5); conversely, "He gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6). God listens to the prayer of the humble man. Only through humility is the heart especially purified. The aim of every virtue, of every spiritual undertaking and struggle

is to purify the heart. Humility, however, is the most effective purifying medication for the heart. Christ "lowered the heavens and came down" (Ps. 18:9). He descended, came down, humbled Himself, and drew near to us as a human being, even though He was a God-

man: both God and man!

We people—and I first—do not bend our neck before the Lord. We do not humble our mindset because the element of pride still lives within us. We struggle to overcome this passionate condition; nevertheless, as soon as

we think, “Now I feel humble,” a second later we are puffed up with pride again because we either experienced some grace while praying, or perhaps we did a good deed. The goad of pride and vainglory prods us, inflates us, and makes us feel as if we

accomplished something.

A certain brother who was being assaulted by prideful thoughts went to seek advice from a renowned elder. “Geronda, I feel the spirit of pride intensifying within me. I believe that I struggle spiritually and I cannot defeat this

thought. What must I do?”

This brother was indeed a good monk. The elder responded, “My child, did you create the heaven and the earth?”

“No, father. God forbid!”

“Well, He who created the heaven and

the earth, He who created the spiritual world, the angels, and the Kingdom above, He who with His command brought the universe into existence out of nothing, said that He is humble and meek (cf. Mt. 11:29). Why are you prideful? You are clay, dirt, sinful, and full

of passions. You have received innumerable blessings from God, and yet you imagine that you are something great? He bent down and washed His disciples' feet. He endured ridicule, curses, and sarcasm from a great multitude of people. We see Him dying naked on

the Cross out of love for us, even though He could have returned the universe to nothing with a single glance. He was so humble; He didn't speak; He didn't utter a word. And we human beings lift our head up and believe that we are something?"

The brother was

tremendously edified when he heard all this wise advice and returned to his cell with a humble spirit.

Man's mind is polluted easily and is cleansed easily. The heart, on the other hand, is cleansed with difficulty and becomes polluted

with difficulty. The heart is full of sinful roots. All the passions are rooted within the heart. This is why we all feel pain when God, Who desires man's salvation and Who detests the death of his soul, attempts to uproot them, in order to deliver our heart from this passionate

state and grant it freedom, so it can feel the joy of the Resurrection and see with its spiritual eyes the Divine Resurrectional Light.

Temptations, hardships, and sorrows that rise against us (either from the devil, from others, or from the world

we carry within us) are medicines. They are all sent and given by God's providence to us, in order for us to regain the lost health of our soul. The health of the soul and heart consists of dispassion, holiness, and true well-being, which will extend into the next

life as well.

When can we realize that we have egotism? When one of our brothers makes a comment to us, or when the elder (our spiritual father and trainer who has been appointed by God to help us acquire dispassion through his instruction) reproaches us

or points out one of our faults. If you feel bothered, upset, full of turmoil, dismay, distress, and anger internally, you can gauge the corresponding size, depth, width, and length of egotism that exists within you. When someone is humble, he accepts

advice, criticism, and insults. If a person does not have the strength to rejoice internally when he is fortunate enough to receive this medicine—rather, to diagnose the degree of his ego—he should at least struggle against the ill feelings.

During the glorious

years when monasticism was at its acme, the fathers of the skete decided to test Abba Moses the Ethiopian, in order to ascertain the degree of humility, meekness, and dispassion he had attained. Abba Moses was a priest. One day, upon entering the

altar in order to put on his vestments in preparation for the Divine Liturgy, the fathers said to him, "What are you doing in here, you dark skinned, black man? You are unworthy to set foot in here! Get out!"

Abba Moses remained silent and left from the

altar. A few days later, they tested him a second time. The first time he kept silent and strangled the internal unrest. During the second assault he not only felt free, but he also blamed himself saying, “Indeed! My body is dark. I have dark skin, and a dark soul. I am

unworthy of being a priest. I am unworthy of entering the altar. The fathers are right."

The fathers were waiting for him a short distance up the road, and they asked him, "Abba, weren't you upset when we spoke to you in that way?"

“Yes, my fathers. The first time I felt quite disturbed, but I suppressed the distress and rebellion. The second time there was no upheaval. With God’s help, I felt peace, and I blamed myself. I realized that things are indeed exactly as you described.”

The fathers concluded that the first state is referred to as restraint while the second one is meekness.

If we find ourselves in a situation similar to the above, and we witness a rebellion taking place within our soul and heart, we must understand that

we have egotism. In which case, we must beseech God through prayer to grant us strength to confront and strangle the upheaval of pride, with Christ Himself as our model: “Learn from Me that I am meek and lowly in heart” (Mt. 11:29). When we witness

a prideful uprising, the forcefulness of the ego, and the constant barrage of illogical thoughts, we must implement self-reproach and begin to blame ourselves. “Why am I upset? Why do I have evil thoughts? What do my anger, rage, and other ill feelings reveal?”

Egotism!

"So you still dwell within me, you terrible beast? When will I slay you? When will I begin to struggle against you seriously? When will I take hold of the sword of the Spirit, the word of God, and the example of Christ, in order to slay

this ferocious animal?" We will encounter this beast at the time of death. We will recognize it through our conscience as she criticizes us for not struggling adequately during the time we were given to war against it and kill it. The horrible ego is the cause of all the

evils in our life.

If we thoroughly examine ourselves, we will discover that egotism is the driving force, the origin, and the heart of all our actions. Let us accuse ourselves, let us throw ourselves down low, and let us realize that we are nothing more than clay

and dirt. The very people who are made of clay step on dirt and clay. God has a Divine nature and He became so humble. We are humble by nature and yet we raise our head high and gloat: “There is no one else like me!” When we are not chosen to do something, this beast

revolts, and a series of "Why? … Why *me*?" begins. This "me" must be strangled.

Monasticism has a wealth of power available to strangle our pride, as long as we take hold of this power and use it to achieve the great eternal victory, with the help of

our God. The meek will see God in the other world. Every prideful person will be excluded from the Kingdom of Heaven. When Christ examines us, we will be asked if we felt and perceived egotism within us. Then, the next question will be if we

struggled adequately, if we followed the directive and advice toward humility. When we experience internal upheaval, we do not make even the slightest effort to strangle the beast within us—even though we clearly see it. Oftentimes we turn a blind eye, we

pretend not to notice, and we look the other way. This is egotism!

Why don't you struggle appropriately my child? Our life is not at our disposal. It can end at any moment. The fair of life where transactions are made to acquire the Kingdom of Heaven will

come to an end. Then, once we close our eyes and die, we will realize how extensively egotism harmed us. However, we will not be able to come back to this life and make amends. We will ask to return; we will seek only one minute from the many years we lived, but

this minute will not be given to us. “Woe unto us,” if we are found in this predicament.

We are unaware of, and our heart has not experienced, the reality of death. We have not felt what our soul will go through as it ascends to Heaven. We have never

come up against the thoughts that will beset us as we face the aerial toll-houses. We have not been informed with God-sent feelings of the way our soul will feel when it is wholeheartedly convinced that it will no longer return back to life on the earth, when it begins to

enter eternity, and when it perceives that this new life will never come to an end. It will then contemplate that in the event of failure it will live eternally in Hell with the demons, it will never see light again, and it will never come to know or behold God.

Subsequently, it will feel and be informed by the conscience that all his brothers are in Heaven celebrating the eternal Pascha, within the glory of God, dressed with the pure-white wedding garments, with which the Bridegroom has provided them. It will feel that his

brothers' souls are participating in the wedding festivities with the Bridegroom, that they are within the Heavenly bridal chamber, and that this gloriously radiant life will never end. We have not experienced these things, these thoughts, these feelings, and, to

some extent, we are spiritually blind. It is as if our heart is spiritually dead and anesthetized.

There were moments when I experienced this during prayer. One night, I woke up in the middle of my sleep, at which time my mind was crystal clear and razor-sharp.

When someone wakes up in the middle of sleep, he feels drowsy and disoriented. But this was not the case with me. My state of mind and heart were such that I truly felt that I had departed from this life and was entering eternity. The feeling of uncertainty was intense!

“What will happen now? How will I face the Righteous Judge? What will I do in the event of failure and eternal damnation?” I truly believed I was departing. I was fully conscious of the Judge, of Hell, and of eternity. It was something that I cannot express with

words. Later during the day I thought to myself, “So these are the things that will occur with my soul when I close my eyes? What must I do now? If I was overcome with such inexpressibly frightful feelings when I only tasted such a small sample of this reality and

truth while I was still alive, what will happen when God actually commands my soul to part from my body?”

The eyes of our soul are closed shut, and we are oblivious to all these things. It is not that we don’t believe them. In theory we understand

everything; however, our heart remains unmoved. Why is it indifferent? Because, if not totally, in part it has not been cleansed. Thus it remains insensitive. We have not forced ourselves to endure patiently the pain associated with the treatment of egotism. Our

heart has not endured the pain associated with the removal of the egotistical roots. This is precisely why we subsist in this condition.

At last, we must recognize our problem, we must acknowledge that egotism exists within us, and we must take a

stance and put up a fight against it. When others point out our mistakes and try to correct us, we should blame ourselves, accuse ourselves, scourge ourselves internally, strike our ego, take full responsibility, justify the person who corrected and cauterized us, and render

thanks to God for attempting to cleanse us. Struggling in this manner, with the grace of God, little by little we will be freed. Our heart will be liberated, the roots of passion will be uprooted, and we will eventually acquire spiritual health and consciously

experience the things of the other world. Then we will see the light of the Divine Resurrection.

"Having seen the Resurrection of Christ ... ."[76] We confess this repeatedly, but do we feel it and see it? No! I personally do not! When will we see it? When we

attain purification.

We must fight against egotism, this evil wickedness, armed with the Prayer of Jesus. The words “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me” should not stop day and night, if possible. When the soul is absent from the body, the body begins

to reek, it becomes infested with maggots, it decays, and it becomes a source of disease. When prayer is absent from the soul, the soul suffers the same consequences. We should always be prepared to strike and slay this beast of egotism within us. We should pray

ceaselessly. We should cense God's temple, which is man's body and soul, with the fragrance of prayer. "We should glorify our Holy God both with our body and with our soul" (cf. 1 Cor. 6:20).

It takes effort! We who are responsible must

take the lead and be the first to struggle. We must set a good example, and, in turn, they who follow must struggle, so that our entire brotherhood becomes worthy of celebrating the eternal and endless Pascha of salvation in the other world, in the eternal life,

in the Jerusalem above, in the unapproachable light, in the infinite joy of God, where the angels encircle, praise, stand before, and offer doxologies and hymns to the Triune God endlessly and eternally. Amen.

St. Athanasios the Athonite

Homily 31

The Frightful Hour of Death

My fathers,

After death, eternity

follows. Every person at a certain moment will abandon his body on the earth and proceed with his soul to eternity: to the life that has no end. Man's soul will remain without the body until the Second Coming of Christ, at which time the bodies of both the righteous and

unrighteous will be resurrected in order to be judged. It is a fact that, after death, man's soul is separated from the body and lives in a unique state.

As we have witnessed, God visited us with the deaths of a few beloved brothers, whom He

received into His Kingdom. Primarily, He took our dearly beloved brother, Father Ephraim, who lived amongst us in this brotherhood.

He was my first spiritual child. As you are well aware, he lived amongst us with perfect obedience and virtuous

conduct. Each one of you knows exactly how much you respected him. On account of his virtuous way of life, he had gained your trust. He helped our brotherhood tremendously. God called him unexpectedly with a traumatic death.

God's decisions

resemble an abyss. Who can fathom the mind or the decisions of the Lord? He knows how to arrange everything correctly. We all suffer to a degree from spiritual near-sightedness, depending on our spiritual maturity and level of discernment, and we form opinions on various

matters accordingly. God, however, as a compassionate and loving Father, understands things quite differently. Oftentimes, He takes people at a young age, even though they are of great value to others spiritually. He decides to receive them at a point in

their life that we feel is too early. The Lord, however, knows when each person is ready, and He acts accordingly.

Had Saint Basil the Great, God's holy hierarch of Caesarea who enlightened the world, lived longer, he would have helped innumerable

souls and the Christian world in general with his presence. However, he was called to the Heavens at the young age of forty-nine. Why? God knows. The Lord did not take into account the benefit that would have ensued if he remained in this world; rather, He decided to

bring him near to Himself in order to deposit securely this extremely precious soul in the divine treasury of His Kingdom. As far as the benefit that Christians would have received, God as a Father arranged this in His own way.

Saint Athanasios the

Athonite of Great Lavra was killed by falling off a scaffold in the altar of the catholicon and thus departed from this world. This resembles the death of Father Ephraim.

I n *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* there is a story of a certain hermit who lived in a cave. One

day, this ascetic gave his disciple handicrafts and instructed him, “My child, go down to the city, sell these items, purchase what we need, and then come back.”

Like a good disciple, this monk made his way to the city where he stayed for a few days

until he sold all their handicrafts. During his time there, he witnessed a funeral being conducted in grand fashion with the most extravagant means of that era. There was a splendid procession with carriages and horses; a large crowd gathered for the ceremony; it was a

beautiful, sunny day. The monk assumed, “An important person must have passed away for such an impressive funeral to be taking place.” He asked someone in the crowd and learned that the most infamous harlot in the city had died. This event came to an

end, and a few days later when he had sold all his handicrafts, he departed to return to his elder.

As he approached their cave, he heard noises from within—a lion was devouring his elder, this saintly, angelic ascetic! At that moment, the monk was shocked.

He became confused and began to reason, “The harlot received such a glorious and honorable burial, whereas this holy man perished in such a violent way, devoured by a beast! Where is God’s justice?” Mentally, he considered this as an unfair and undiscerning

decision on God's part, so he decided to return to the world, since things were not as he had been taught. When he began to head back to the city, God looked favorably upon him, through the prayers of his elder. An angel appeared to him and asked, "Why have you

drawn such an unmerited conclusion concerning God's judgment?"

"How could I think otherwise, my angel, after witnessing such controversial deaths between my elder, who was a holy man, and the harlot?"

"God's righteous

judgment is different than the way things appear to be. The harlot had done some good things in life. And your elder, prior to becoming an ascetic, while he was still a layman, had committed certain sins. God gave the harlot what was rightfully owed to her for her good

works; now He owes her nothing. Since her life was burdened by sin, it was necessary for Him to repay her fairly for her few good deeds; hence, she received a memorable funeral on a bright, sunny day. Your elder, on the other hand, paid off his debt for the sins he had

committed in the world, and he departed according to God's righteous judgment completely immaculate and radiant, without a single blemish on the garment of his soul."

As soon as the humble disciple heard from the angel how God had

judged matters, he asked for forgiveness, blamed himself, and returned to his elder's cave where he continued his ascetical way of life.

This is why we should never rashly pass judgment on the death or action of any person. God does not only work out

the salvation of the deceased, but He also seeks to help the rest of us who are still alive by giving us the opportunity to correct ourselves. Each one of us must seriously consider and realize that all the things of this world are vanity, and that man's life is truly a

dream. Since this life is a dream, we should make certain not to be disillusioned by it; instead, we should strive to correct and obey our conscience, so that we are prepared for physiological death whenever and however it arrives.

Death is inherited by every person who lives on this planet. How the world fools us! It toys with everyone like a cat plays with mice. It teases us, it makes us imagine fictitious things, it deceives us, and at the time of death it reveals the truth to us. At that

moment, every soul realizes that it has been tricked by the devil, the world, and the flesh. The world feeds our imagination with so many things, which it serves to us as appetizing bait, in order to hook us in with sin.

The time of death is

terrifying, as the hymnologist attests: “What a struggle the soul has as it departs from the body! How it laments and wails! It turns its eyes to the angels and beseeches them in vain. It stretches its hands toward its kin, but no one can help it.” The soul, all alone,

prepares to meet the Righteous Judge and give an account for its actions. It is overcome with immense fear and trembling at that moment. Now we are discussing these things, but we have not experienced them. The people who have departed and have

suffered through this frightful hour are not present to reveal and describe it to us, even though it cannot be expressed with human words.

We will all be subject to the mystery of death. It is up to us, it is within our power (through the help

and compassion of God) to get ready to meet this moment with our soul prepared as much as possible, for this will ease the fear and trembling of death.

According to the sacred hymns of the funeral service and the counsels of the holy

Fathers, during this frightful moment the demons approach to threaten us and to instill terror and fear. They attempt to intimidate the soul, so that it loses hope in salvation. They present God as cruel and unforgiving. Only the demons themselves and

the souls who have departed from this life are aware of what exactly they utter. Just seeing them makes the soul distraught—because how can it respond? What can it reply? Who will help it? How can its loved ones provide assistance? It is absorbed in thought as it

loses touch with its surroundings.

It receives consolation only when God's angels draw near. When our big brothers come to the aid of the soul, it turns its eyes and gazes intently at them, pleading for help: "Save me," it cries out. "Save me from the

demons!” The angels, of course, with their presence provide consolation for the soul; however, the primary source of consolation and hope of liberation stems from God and the peaceful conscience.

The conscience: it will play the most pivotal

role. If the conscience does not incriminate the soul, it takes courage and hopes in the protection of God and His angels. However, the moment our conscience begins to condemn us, the taste of dreadful, eternal hell starts. May God be merciful on every human

soul during that frightful moment! If the departing soul had committed deadly and grave sins, it will inevitably be snatched by the demons. It is questionable if it will be able to escape from them and begin its journey upward.

In the case of a saved

soul or a soul with a chance of being saved, the angels take the soul and lead it to the Righteous Judge. As it ascends, it passes through the various toll-houses, which represent each one of the deadly sins. It will be examined for every passion and weakness. If

it is found guilty, it will stop at the corresponding toll-house.

If, however, it bypasses all the toll-houses, it will worship Christ the Master. In following, according to the Orthodox tradition of our Church, it will travel with its guardian angel to

the holy abodes of God's Kingdom. Then it will visit Hades, and, in turn, all the places it lived throughout the years of its earthly life. Finally, on the fortieth day it will conclude its journey and return before Christ to hear the decision. Imagine how the soul

fears and trembles. It rejoices when it beholds the Kingdom of God, but it also wonders: “Will I achieve it? Will I actually come to dwell here? I don’t know for sure.” When it passes through Hell and witnesses the tortures it wonders, “What if I am sent here?

Woe unto me! It's not going to last a few years. No! It will be forever." As it proceeds to visit all the places it lived, then it will see many things. The soul will be ashamed to look at the places where it sinned; conversely, it will rejoice wherever it accomplished virtue. By

the end of this whole time, the soul will realize and understand to some extent whether God's decision will be positive or negative. All these constitute the great truth of our Orthodox Church.

We have witnessed many deaths. We have indeed observed this

mystery in people who departed from this life. They revealed to us through their behavior, their facial expressions, their eyes, their uneasiness or their serenity, what exactly transpires invisibly during the mystery of death. We are completely

convinced that everything contained within the Holy Scriptures, our sacred tradition, and the ascetical tradition of our Church is true, and it cannot be otherwise.

For this reason, we should—and I first—seriously take into account this reality and

regulate our life accordingly. Let us correct our lives in order to avoid eternal Hell and instead acquire (through God's mercy and compassion) the Kingdom of Heaven. We must take a long, hard look at our salvation and realize that it is not a game; it is not

something we can ignore; it is not a joke.

We see this reality being confirmed by the people who have departed from this life. Where are our fathers who were with us just a short while ago? Where are the brothers who lived with us, and with whom we

conversed? Now they are no longer amongst us. This will happen to us as well; we just don't know when. This is why we should reflect, "Where are they now? Were they saved or not? Soon, the people who stay behind in this life will think and wonder the same things

about us.”

Let us stare at our salvation straight in the eyes, no matter how alarming and embarrassing it is. Let us correct our life. Let us thank God from the depth of our heart, and let us offer Him praise and doxology because we are

still alive and we can amend the matters related to our soul and prepare ourselves. We do not know, as we see in practice, the day, the hour, or the moment of our departure from this world. Let us do our prayer rule. Let us not neglect our vigil. Let us

not be sluggish when it comes to attending church and the Liturgy. Let us love one another, because love is God, and "he who remains in love, remains in God and God in him" (1 Jn. 4:16). Who loves God? He who keeps His commandments. The first and foremost

commandment is to love God; the second, to love our neighbor and brother.

When, however, we do not fulfill God's commandments, this is a clear indication that we do not love Him, and we have transgressed the first commandment. If we do not love our brothers, if

we criticize them, if we slander them, if we accuse them, if we harbor ill feelings toward them, behold: we have transgressed God's second great commandment. "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer" (1 Jn. 3:15); "he is in darkness and

walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going" (1 Jn. 2:11).

We waste our time instead of using it to pray. Our precious time, this currency that God has given us, disappears. We do not use it to purchase valuable items that will be useful for the Kingdom

of Heaven. The devil tricks and outwits us. We buy negligence, slothfulness, idle talk, criticism, scattering of the mind, and harmful thoughts. All this "merchandise" is accrued by misusing life's precious currency. Unfortunately, tomorrow

we will find ourselves in the position that our brothers were in just a while ago, and we will ask ourselves, “What have I done! How was I fooled? How was I deceived? I didn’t expect to die so suddenly!”

Oh, really? You didn’t know? You never heard

that this is how people die? Of course you did! Can our conscience lie and fabricate something untrue? Not at all. It will loudly proclaim the truth. Woe unto me, because I do not practice what I preach.

Let us condemn and humble ourselves before

God. Let us humble ourselves before our Crucified Christ and beseech Him for forgiveness. Let us correct ourselves so that our petition for His Divine Blood to wash and cleanse us, and for His death to become life for us may be fulfilled. We

must thank God from the depth of our heart for keeping us alive until now and granting us time to correct ourselves. Our brothers, on the other hand, who have departed from this life can no longer do anything for themselves. Now they are waiting for help from the

Church, from their brothers, and from us.

When our saint, my holy elder, was informed of the day he would leave this life, I asked him, "Geronda, what would you like us to do?"

I was referring to forty-liturgies, memorial services, etc. This great

and wise man of God replied, “Go ahead, do these for your own peace of mind. But woe unto me if I had to depend on these alms to be saved!”

Think how meticulously he prepared himself so as not to count on the prayers of others to assist him in salvation.

We of course—and I first—seek help because our conscience accuses us of not doing God's will. This is why we also fear death. Our conscience does not assure us. It remains deficient and is in need of reconciliation; whereas, the conscience of the great elder was in

good order. He would reassure me, “My child, all I have to do is cross the bridge (he was referring to death). After that, my account with God is settled, through His grace. Everything has been arranged!”

What a brilliant and confident conscience!

This is why he would also exhort, “Fulfill your obligations.”

He would advise us to make peace with our conscience with respect to our obligations before the elder.

May our good God enlighten each one of us and give us the strength

(according to our position and responsibilities) to settle and arrange any outstanding debts. Let us exert ourselves; let us not be negligent. The present life is not a time for negligence and procrastination. We should struggle not only now that the death of our

brothers is fresh in our minds; rather, we should preserve this feeling as we move forward in order to correct ourselves.

No one is sinless except our Holy God. No holy person left the earth without some small sin; however, this did not impede their salvation

and holiness. Incidental mistakes do not detract holiness from a person. This is why only God is sinless. The great Fathers advise us to commit as few sins as possible, insignificant sins that do not hinder our salvation. For when the scalepan is full of virtue, it will tip

the scale, and these small sins will be tossed into the air.

Let us struggle continuously, striving to maintain sincere, correct, and true obedience; not a feigned obedience that in reality conceals self-will, disobedience, and poison. We should not do our own

will because one day we will regret it. As we know, God does not expect a disciple to err with sins common to laypeople. For a disciple, fornication and adultery are committed, essentially, when he errs in obedience. Disobedience is the

“number-one” mistake; conversely, obedience is the principal means of salvation. A disciple with sincere obedience has secured his salvation and will enjoy its best portion. He is the most fortunate person on earth. He has the most promising hope and likelihood of entering

into the Kingdom of God.

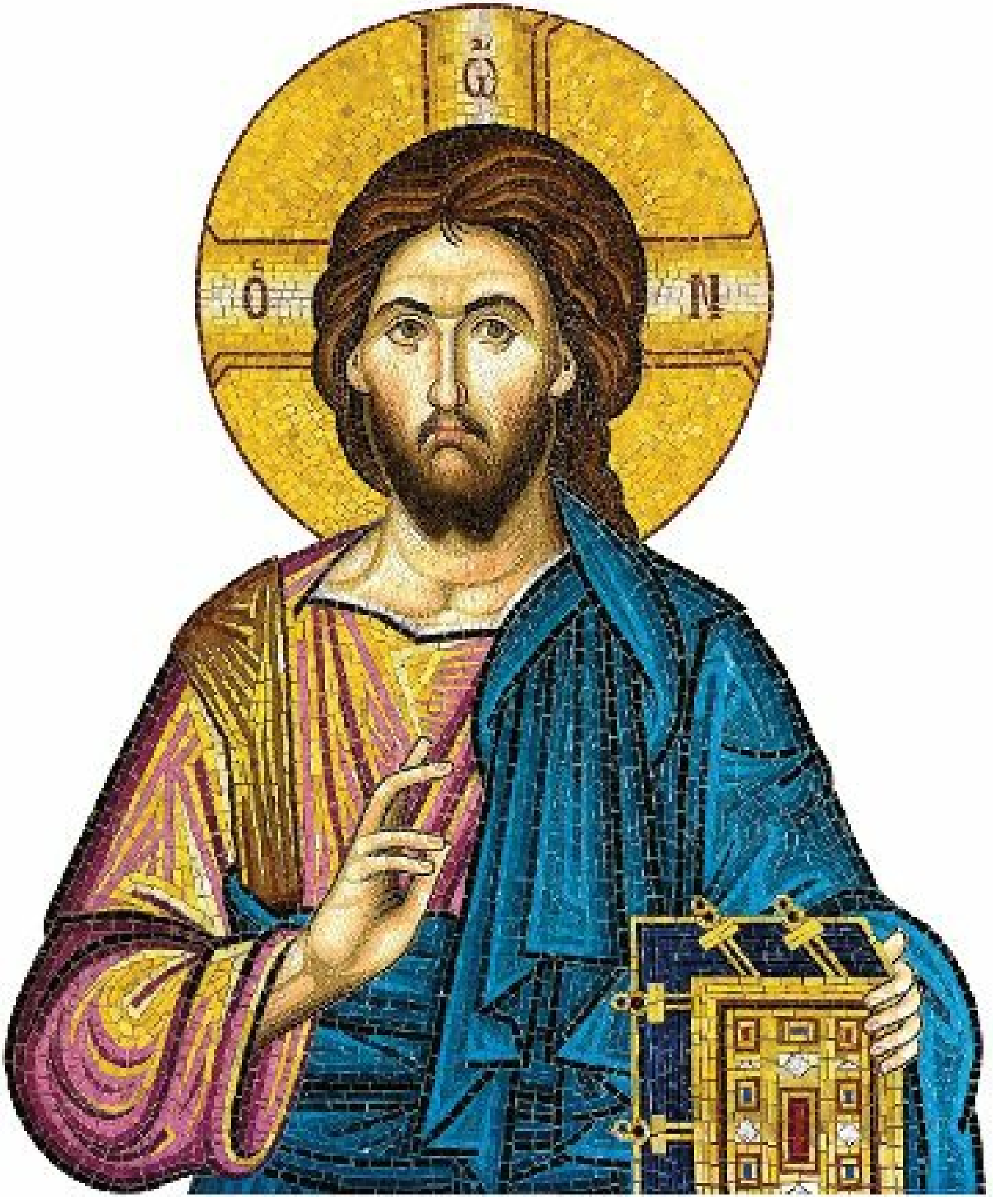
On the other hand, we who are in charge and give orders, we who lift the burdens, mistakes, and sins of others, are at risk of losing our salvation. We are endangered not so much from our own sins—for there is hope that we will

be saved through God's mercy—but rather from the sins of and the responsibility for others. This is the primary hazard for people in our position who are responsible for souls and who carry others on their shoulders. For the disciple, however, no such risk exists. With

a very simple and uncomplicated life, by simply saying, “Forgive me,” and “May it be blessed,” the disciple enters into the Kingdom of God.

May God, through His infinite mercy, permit all of us to be found together in the joy and bliss of His

eternal Kingdom. Amen.



Jesus Christ the Savior

Homily 32

Let Every Breath Praise the Lord

My blessed children,

When we lived with my

elder at New Skete, he would continually advise, counsel, and encourage us to say the Prayer of our Christ and to hold vigil courageously. He had implanted deeply within us the necessity of the Prayer and watchfulness during vigil. “Do not regard a monk who keeps

vigil and prays with watchfulness as an earthly man," he would teach us, "but as an angel of God." Just as the angels in Heaven behold the Lord, ceaselessly and perpetually praising the Triune God with unending delight and elation, similarly, monks must

keep vigil, offer hymns, remain watchful, mourn, and shed tears day and night.

Night time is more conducive, of course, when all of nature rests in stillness—especially since during these hours man ceases occupying himself with daily cares.

Man's mind pauses from the preoccupation and effort of the day; thus, with a rested and clear mind, his prayer is more productive as he keeps vigil.

My elder would monitor us to see if we prayed ceaselessly. He would not advise us with

excessive (that is, with lengthy) theories. On the contrary! He would speak briefly; however, his teaching was concise and straight to the point.

Once, he advised the following to a certain monk from our brotherhood: “Say the Prayer, my child. I don’t

hear you saying the Prayer!”

“Come on, Geronda. I’ve been a monk for so many years, and you want me to say it verbally?”

“My child, are you embarrassed to say the Prayer because the method of verbal invocation seems to be

for beginners? You believe that you are advanced? We should be embarrassed when we do not say the Prayer, when we allow our mind to roam about freely everywhere, and when our mouth does not stop running. This is shameful in the eyes of both God

and men.”

Another brother would say the Prayer continuously and incessantly. One day, the grace of the Holy Spirit visited this monk—even though it had become manifest in the past from time to time in different ways. On that particular

day, after repeating the Prayer of our Christ for a long time, both the eyes of his soul as well as the corporeal eyes of his body were opened, and he suddenly saw things very differently! This person was unable to explain exactly what occurred. Everything he was seeing

and hearing was something extraordinary, which was associated with the supernatural realm. The birds were chirping; the plants were in full bloom; the flowering trees were fragrant; the sun was shining brilliantly: everything was

proclaiming the glory of God! It was as if he was beholding sheer Paradise. A revelation had taken place: it was the unveiling of a mystery that is hidden from us who lack such spiritual eyes. “Let every breath praise the Lord” (Ps. 150:6). Both the animal and the plant

kingdoms were proclaiming the glory, magnificence, splendor, and beauty of God! This person was standing in awe, speechless! Tears were flowing from his eyes—not because of his sins, but on account of God's beauty. It is a wonder how his heart was

able to withstand this revelation of God's beauty!

This is how it was when Adam dwelled in God's Paradise. All of Paradise served as a tangible visualization and contemplation of God. Adam's soul would fill with delight and elation

as he approached each living entity that God created and hear it voice praise to the Lord.

Something similar took place when Saint Nektarios of Pentapolis was still alive. Once, while at his monastery in Aegina, the nuns asked him to explain the

meaning of the verse, “Let every breath praise the Lord.” “I will tell you,” he replied, “just be patient.” One night while they were all holding vigil outside, the saint distanced himself a little to pray alone. Suddenly, the nuns heard, felt, and sensed—through a

supernatural event that they were unable to explain—that all of creation exhaled simultaneously, voicing a mystical sound. At that moment, they were informed that this is the meaning of, “May every breath praise the Lord.” All of creation was

praising the Lord and Creator in unison, with one breath.

We also know from reading the lives of the holy Fathers that they would pray all night long, oftentimes continuing into the next day, without realizing that the night and day had passed. Time

had vanished for them because their minds had been transposed. Their minds would be displaced, disengaged from all earthly things, and transported to the other world. Thus, David states that, “One thousand years are like one day, and as a part of the night”

(Ps. 89:4). In other words, one thousand years of this world are like a moment in the other world. The angels ceaselessly praise God without realizing what time means.

Prayer is the boast and adornment of every Christian, and especially of every monk. A monk

who does not pray lacks this special beauty and grace in his soul and nous. What do we mean by “beauty of the nous?” The nous acquires beauty when the mind is transported during the time of vigil and prayer toward God and the spiritual world: the realm

that has no association or relation to this physical world. When the Holy Spirit descends, this transposition of the nous occurs instantly. At once, the nous comes into contact with the Divine light and Heavenly Paradise. It races toward the supernatural and

beyond, where it delves in contemplation; where it is nourished, embellished, and brightened; where it becomes fragrant, and ecstatic. All these things are achieved through prayer. The basis, the starting point, and the launch pad for the other world is the blessed

Prayer. Is there anything this Prayer cannot accomplish, correct, or put in order? No!

The devil is mindful of this Prayer and desires to stop it. This is the motto of all the legions of demons. They all unanimously seek to prevent us from uttering

the name of Jesus. They don't want His name proclaimed on the earth; they don't want to hear it; it must be abolished.

Christ, on the one hand, clearly declares, "Whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father Who is in heaven"

(Mt. 10:32). This is huge! This is highly significant! "I will acknowledge and justify before My Father and My angels," says Christ, "whomever calls out My name, thus proclaiming My Divinity. Such a person will ultimately be crowned. The angels will chant

victorious hymns for this conqueror of My Divine name.”

On the other hand, we notice that the demons suffer. When they hear Christ’s name, they become unsettled and feel sick. When the devil enters a person hypostatically, man falls

on the ground, he froths at the mouth, he rolls his eyes, he becomes a sorrowful sight, and many people cannot restrain him. Not even chains can bind or restrain an earthly human being when the devil lays hold of him. This is precisely what the devil himself experiences.

He feels unimaginable agony and becomes "possessed" when a person voices the Prayer with love, desire, and zeal to confess Christ.

Christ must reign. Why did He ascend the Cross? "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He" (

Jn. 8:28). This is what He states in His Holy Gospel. In a godly manner, He informed us that there will come a time (when you crucify Me and elevate Me on the Cross), when you will come to know the power of My Divinity and the strength of My Divine name.

Then, every tongue, every race, and every person will worship and confess that Christ is the Judge of the living and the dead. "Every knee—angels, humans, and demons—will bow" (cf. Php. 2:10). Blessed and fortunate is the person who will confess the name of

Christ in this life. No matter how sinful he is, no matter how extensive his criminal record is, when he confesses the name of Christ, Christ Himself will obliterate the weight of his sins.

"Blessed is the person whose transgressions have been pardoned and

whose sins have been forgiven" (Ps. 31:1). Sins are forgiven and erased when a person calls his Lord and God to his aid because Christ grants repentance to him. He grants restorative and rejuvenating repentance with tears and mourning. And after this state of

tears and mourning, He leads man to joyful mourning and to the tears of divine love. A person ascends from one state to the next. The Jesus Prayer gives rise to all these and countless other good things. Nothing else—the name of Christ alone.

What did the scribes

and Pharisees say to the Apostles after apprehending them, as they examined and threatened them? “Did we not forbid you to teach in this name? Stop speaking about this name” (cf. Acts 5:28). “No!” responded the courageous Apostle Peter. “It is not possible

for us to keep silent … It is necessary to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). "We will always confess and preach 'what we have seen and heard,' and no one will close our mouth" (cf. Acts 4:20). As a result, the sons of the devil crucified him upside down. He was

martyred with his head down and his feet up. The Apostle Andrew suffered a similar death. So did the rest of the Apostles and martyrs. Everything happened on account of this name. Even today, when we utter the name of Christ, if we could observe with our eyes

what takes place invisibly, we would exclaim, “Indeed! The name of Christ stirs up Hell even today, and it will always do so.”

Don’t the Jehovah’s Witnesses also experience this same turmoil within themselves? Of course! The devil has wonderfully

convinced them to accept and state with ease, "We believe that Christ is *a* son of God." Okay. But let's proceed a little further. In what sense is He the Son of God? All we who believe and have been reborn in Christ are children of God by grace. Our Christ, however, is

the only begotten Son of God by nature. What did the theological tongue of the Apostle John thunder? "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and **the Word was God**" (Jn. 1:1). Jehovah's Witnesses cannot repeat this, because this confession

by Saint John the Apostle and Theologian serves as their Waterloo. This is what we profess, cry out, and thunder when we pray with the name of Christ.

This name must be firmly implanted in our life. We should cry out the name of Christ night and day. The Prayer

“Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me” is a confession of Christ’s name and simultaneously a petition for mercy. What is better than this? We should confess Christ’s name and fill the atmosphere with the beauty of His divinity, and, in following, we

should ask the Lord to be merciful "upon our sins." When a Christian, and especially a monk, asks for mercy and forgiveness, when he says, "Lord Jesus Christ, save me," how can Christ possibly ignore this person and not send him His gifts? How can such a

person not come to know His Light? How can he not experience rapture[77] of the mind? How can he not cry within the Light, within the superbrilliant darkness of the Divine Radiance? How is it possible for him not to discover Christ—just as He is—within this Light?

Of course, at the onset of our journey to confess and establish the name of God, the benefit is not immediately apparent. We will encounter difficulty; we will realize that it requires an effort and struggle on our part. This is due to the opposing legions of

demons who want us to stop. The initial difficulty of prayer will cease, nonetheless, and during the period of verbal invocation of the Divine name, we will feel Christ's consolation. Subsequently, when the Prayer is continuously accompanied by our

careful way of life, in due time, God will also visit us, and we will see the benefit, which we are unaware of presently. It is impossible for the eyes of the soul not to open.

As we stated at the beginning of our talk, vigils must consistently accompany the Prayer.

We must hold vigil without fail. We must remain watchful by implementing prayer, contemplation, and all-round abstinence. All-around abstinence entails restraining our five senses, our mouth, and, above all, our imagination. We should

not allow our mind to race freely all over the world. When we talk without end, how can our mind remain serene? Likewise, if we keep silent but allow our mind to roam freely, how will it have the ability and the clarity to ascend to the

theoria[78] of God?

Hence, comprehensive abstinence and general attention are mandatory. We should pay attention to what we say, to what we think, to how we conduct ourselves with each other, to how we keep our obedience. “Do we sincerely fear God?

Do we obey our conscience? Do we examine our conscience? Does it reproach us for any of our thoughts or actions? Do we take spiritual inventory? Do we say the Prayer frequently? Where does our mind drift? How much did I speak today?

With whom did I speak? Did I say anything inappropriate?" When we examine ourselves in this manner, the gauge, the "computer," will reveal if we have criticized someone, or spoken unnecessarily; if we became angry, or did not complete our work

correctly; if we were negligent, did not wake up for vigil, or wasted time dwelling on absurd thoughts.

“I have sinned, forgive me my God! I have sinned before my Lord. Forgive me, O Lord, I will not do this again. Help me, grant me

attentiveness. I repent!” We can say these and so many other things as well. In this manner, you will receive strength to deal with matters more effectively. If you are attentive and confront things in this way, you will certainly make progress. Day by day you

will steadily improve, and, in due time, you will no longer make any serious mistakes.

First and foremost, however, we should carefully examine ourselves to discover if we possess the virtue of humility. This must be our primary focus.

Egotism and pride prevent every single thing that is good and preclude all improvement. Humility is the “green light,” whereas pride, egotism, and vainglory serve as a “red light.” They do not allow us to move forward. When we turn off the red light and

turn on the green light, we begin to move forward once more.

How can we tell if we possess pride and egotism? If you feel uneasy inside or become embittered, if your ego revolts or you begin to argue (either with your mind internally or with

your mouth externally) when another person belittles you, rebukes you, or speaks to you in an impolite manner, this is proof that the heart is infested with pride and egotism. The harsh word, which God permitted to be directed at you, serves as medication. It is

rubbing alcohol that induced pain as it was poured into the wound. Of course, this pain is beneficial if we accept it with the proper mindset. In this instance, the wound is cauterized therapeutically. Next time, the rubbing alcohol (that is, the other person's

words) will be less bitter and painful. Soon thereafter even less so, and in this manner the wound will begin to heal and gradually close. When, however, we react to the pain by retaliating, becoming embittered, feeling hurt, or losing our temper, we have refused

to accept the medicine, and the wound worsens. In an ensuing similar situation, the pain will be more intense, and the condition will progressively deteriorate. And if it remains untreated, a person reaches a point of not tolerating even the

slightest comment or glance.

Humility opens the door leading into God's innermost chamber. As we pray with and utter the name of God externally, we are also in need of humility to steer us correctly and guide us unerringly, so that the

Prayer becomes fruitful. The name of Christ itself will grant us humility; that is, the notion that we are sinful, guilty, full of passions and wounds, criminals with defiled souls. I am blind; therefore, I cry out to and beseech my Christ to grant me sight, to

enlighten my eyes, to heal my wounds, to clear my criminal record, to restore my health—because I am sick—to cleanse me, and to render me fragrant. This is the reason I call upon the name of Christ—not because I'm something special. If I have achieved something

good, how did I acquire it? According to the Apostle Paul, “What do you have which you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” (1 Cor. 4:7). If we have received everything from God, including our very

existence, then we are nothing: we are a zero, and a non-entity.

God the Creator brought us humans into existence with great ease; consequently, whatever we possess belongs to Him. We are unquestionably indebted to serve the Lord. God

made the mouth I use to say a few good words. God made the hands I use to work, to help others, to serve my brothers, or to carry out acts of love. The feet I use to set out eagerly for my chores belong to God as well. God also created the mind I use to think positively

about Him and my brothers. Consequently, I have nothing of my own. I am an absolute zero. If Christ chooses to place the number “one” in front of this zero, then the zero becomes a ten, and we receive a perfect grade. We receive honors in God’s eyes. The zero

begins to take shape, and when God blesses it, it acquires a divine hypostasis; it receives grace and inebriation from God. How beautiful it is when the nous and heart of man experience such magnificence! At that time, divine blessedness reigns. God's

goodness, kindness, bliss, and grandeur pervade the human heart, and man becomes one with the Lord. Everything vanishes, all things disappear, and man senses nothing other than God within himself!

However, when a person is conceited, he

will also be careless, he will err and fall into sin. No one falls if he does not first think highly of himself. Once man sins, God withdraws His blessing and an earthquake shakes the very foundations of the soul. Then everything within the soul is

desolated, and man feels a general collapse. When a person humbles himself again and acknowledges his fall, once he repents, changes, feels remorse, and weeps bitterly as Peter did (vid. Mt. 26:75), then the Lord again sends His Spirit to rejuvenate and restore him.

Everything is in the hands of the Almighty God.

Thus, when we commemorate the name of God and hold on tightly to the foundation of humility, we proceed directly toward the Divine Throne and the heavenly transposition of the mind and heart toward the other

world. We must keep a tight grip on the steering wheel so we do not swerve away from humility. Our mindset must be humble, meek, and lowly. We should think as follows: “I am earth, ashes, and clay—nothing more.” What is the value of clay and

mud? It is stepped on by humans and animals. From this mud, I became a human being: the invaluable creation of God, who is a synthesis of the spiritual and material worlds. With God, I become important and distinguished; without Him, I am dirt that is

stepped on by humans and animals.

Let the name of Christ reign within us. May this blessed and limitlessly graceful name become our food, our drink, our clothing, our oxygen, our life, our heart, and our nous—may it become everything. When it

becomes everything to us, then we will acquire Him Who has created everything. When Christ reigns in our heart through His Divine name, then the peace that surpasses every mind (cf. Php. 4:7) will reign within us. When Christ rules, all things—

including passions and weaknesses—surrender and subjugate themselves to Him. This constitutes a state of perfection that can never be perfected.[79]

We, however, will be quite satisfied if we manage to hold on tightly to the name of Christ,

maintain a humble mindset, weep for our sins, and feel the peace of God in our souls.

Let us struggle with all our might. If Christ prevails in our life, then things will fall into place on their own. Our thoughts, our works, our words, and our interaction

with others, everything will be synchronized with the rhythm of salvation. If Christ is absent, if Christ is not our life, if He is not present with us on our journey and does not enlighten us, everything will go wrong. It is either Christ or chaos; either light or darkness. There is

nothing in between. This is the teaching of Christ and the holy Fathers.

Let us always call upon the name of Christ. When a monk calls upon this name, the atmosphere and his surroundings fill with blessings. Not only does the person who is praying benefit

personally, but so do others around him who hear the name of Christ. If I happen to be thinking of something sinful, when I hear my brother crying out the name of Christ, I will rebuke myself: “What am I doing? Where is my mind travelling? My brother is exerting

himself to acquire the Kingdom of Heaven; he is calling the name of Christ. Why am I laughing and speaking idly? Am I in my right mind? Why did I come to the monastery? Didn't I come here to confess Christ in word and deed?" As a result, I will feel

remorse, and I will begin to say the Prayer as well. Who is responsible for my correction? Is it not the brother who helped me by praying aloud?

As the saying goes, “When the cat’s away, the mice will play.” When the name of Christ is not heard, the demons hurl

evil thoughts into our mind and place words on our lips. They urge us to speak idly, to poke fun at each other, to joke and laugh uncontrollably. They push us to do our own will, encourage us to live idiorrhythmically, and render us “unmonastic.”

When, however, the name of Christ is heard throughout the monastery, it is like the sound of dogs barking: the beasts distance themselves and thieves do not approach. The more aggressive the dog and the fiercer it barks, the further away the enemies retreat. Thus,

the sheep graze peacefully as the shepherd plays his flute. The above will not occur if there are no sheepdogs to bark and fend off the predators. A monastery is similar to this. Each monastery is a spiritual sheep pen, and the fathers comprise the flock. Zeal,

according to Saint Isaac, is the sheepdog. Zeal is expressed when the name of Christ is employed in theory and in practice. When someone wants to speak idly, how will he go to strike up a conversation with a person who is praying? He will think to himself,

“It’s not right for me to interrupt him.” He will consider it wrong. Thus, when a person prays, he not only safeguards himself but also prevents others from speaking idly. This is how one person helps the other. This is why we are called brothers, and this is why

Christ gathered us here—to help each other. “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). “A brother aided by his brother is like a strong and fortified city” (Pr. 18:19).

A monastery will become impregnable and

unified when love reigns within it: when love exists in our souls. When will this love appear? When our Christ of love rises to power. If Christ does not reign within us, we will not possess proper love. We are not referring to the love that develops between us

when we have things in common or when we sit and gossip. This is not considered love! We are not referring to this type of love. Such love is diseased, and in due time, people have fall outs, and this love falls apart. The love granted by Christ is founded upon Christ,

Who is the unifying link.

So then, my blessed children, the Prayer will grant us all the good things, including humility and brotherly love. This is why we must confess Christ night and day. As soon as we open our eyes from sleep, we should begin confessing the

name of Christ, breathing in Christ, and feeding on Christ. And when a person is nourished and watered with the name of Christ, he can never die.

Holy Pentecost

Homily 33

During Prayer, a Kind of Mystery Takes Place

Today, I will tell you certain things from the life of my blessed elder—primarily concerning the practical method of the Prayer, as the elder practiced it himself and taught it to us.

Back then, when we lived in the wilderness,

our program was to wake up from sleep at sunset and to begin praying. After having a cup of coffee to help us stay awake during the vigil, each one of us would go to our cell where we would begin our vigil and prayer according to the manner and method of the

elder.

The elder would instruct us, “When we awake from sleep, our mind is rested and clear. This initial state of clarity and serenity is the perfect opportunity to offer it the name of Christ as initial spiritual nourishment. Sit on your stool and, before

starting to say the Prayer ‘Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me,’ consider the following for a few minutes: think of death; that this is your last night; that in a few hours, once you’ve finished praying, you will depart for the other world; that the angels and demons will

appear during the moment of your departure; that they will present to you both the good and bad deeds you have committed throughout your entire life; that the demons will attempt to make you despair; they will claim that your deeds are evil, and accordingly

you cannot be saved; the angels, on the other hand, will counter by presenting your virtues and godly deeds. A prehearing of sorts will take place, and at the conclusion of this initial trial, the soul will depart to meet the Judge. Before the soul arrives to kneel before the fearsome

Judge, it will pass through the aerial toll-houses, where various groups of demons are stationed eagerly waiting to demand an account for specific sins. The soul will pass through these toll-houses. If they allow her to move on, she will reach the Judge. If,

however, she is stopped somewhere, she will be pronounced guilty and held responsible, and from there the demons will drag her down into Hell, according to the opinion of the Fathers.” This is one contemplation. The elder would advise us to think

about these things briefly before starting to say the Prayer noetically.

Of course, there are other beneficial contemplations as well that can be brought to mind before starting to pray, such as our sinfulness, the Second Coming, and so forth. We

must reflect on these without imagining or fantasizing about them mentally. Such contemplations will generate an ambiance of mourning and contrition within us, thus suitably preparing and enabling our soul to begin praying with spiritual devotion,

without distractions. Once a state of mourning and contrition is created within our soul, we should direct our nous toward the area of our heart.

This turning of the nous toward the heart is facilitated when our nous remains situated in the

location where man's breathing begins, near the point where the inhaled air enters the heart and the lungs. As we inhale, the mind must follow the air toward the heart. Anchor your mind at the point where your inhaled air stops. Once you find the location of the heart

using this method, say the Prayer “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me” with your inner voice as you inhale; then repeat, “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me,” as you exhale. As we breathe like this, the mind must remain located in the area of the heart without thinking or

imagining Christ, the Panagia, or anything else. The nous should be careful not to accept images. It should be repeating the Prayer with its inner voice while positioned within the area of the heart, and inclined with love toward Christ, Whom it commemorates

with the Prayer. This is the practical method of the Jesus Prayer.

The person who prays alone ascends from practice to theoria. Starting with this practical method, we ascend, advance, approach, and reach God through theoria. If,

however, the nous is not purified through this method of prayer, it cannot acquire the ability to approach, touch, and feel Christ through theoria.

The devil despises this prayer with a passion and impedes man from praying in this way, as the

holy Fathers have taught us. He also takes his measures. He thoroughly prepares to launch an attack in hope of compromising the spiritual fortress that the soldier of Christ builds to wage war against him. Thus, Christ's soldier must diligently take

corresponding precautionary measures in order to complete the construction of the fortress without being hindered by his enemy.

We must give our undivided attention to the nous. The nous is the governor; it is the eye of the soul and heart of man.

The nous, with the grace of God and with man's effort, must remain fully attentive for this method to be implemented according to all the guidelines of the holy Fathers, and to attain the desired outcome.

Man must be careful as soon as he awakes

from sleep. As we have mentioned, the devil watches us closely. He is well aware that we intend to get up to pray, so he is already up and preparing beforehand, so to speak. As soon as we wake up, he will begin bombarding us with thoughts. He will begin to replay images

from various daily events, in an attempt to cloud our mind with this initial batch of photographs and hinder us from starting the practical method of prayer with a clear mind. For this reason, as soon as we awake and open our eyes, we must immediately begin to

repeat “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me” with our mouth. We should whisper it quietly in order to intercept the devil and prevent him from conveying to us his prayer —which is his evil in its entirety. Once we begin to say “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me”

steadily and softly, we should proceed to splash some water on our face (as this refreshes and revives the mind). Next, we can drink some water or something else for a boost of energy, and, without delay, we should attentively recite the Trisagion[80] and the

Creed—the glory of Orthodoxy.

Then, we should sit on our small stool and begin to contemplate our departure. “What a struggle the soul has as it is separated from the body!”[81] “How much does the soul weep at that

final moment as it considers God's judgment that awaits, and its own unpreparedness." Of course, these and other such meditations should not be accompanied by mental images, but only words, and the mind should follow the meaning of these ideas. A

few minutes later, once a contrite and mournful state has been created, we should straightaway begin employing the practical method of the Prayer.

The nous must now expel every contemplation and thought; it must lead itself to the area where

our breathing begins. We will breathe in a controlled manner: not as we breathe regularly, but somewhat reserved. As we inhale and the air is forced toward the heart, we should say the Prayer once. The nous should remain at the heart as we say another prayer during

exhalation. As we inhale and exhale, the nous should remain vigilant. It should hold itself at the heart vigilantly, lest any image appears.

Occupying ourselves with this method for as long as God allows, and assuming that the nous remained motionless, that

it resisted and distanced all images that appeared, and repeated the Prayer without fail, consistently according to this practical format, let us suppose that it received a blessing from God. The nous acquired purity; that is, it felt peace, serenity, and tranquility. It felt lighter;

it felt something drawing it upward. Where? To meet God! A spiritual magnet draws the nous upward to this special contact with God.

When such a thing occurs, it is as if two people who have lived on separate continents and have not seen each other

for many years suddenly meet. During this reunion, on account of their mutual love, they break out in many tears, and they express themselves in a way that reveals their love and the union of their hearts. This is precisely what happens when the soul and the

nous come into contact with God. The end result of this meeting and union are the tears that flow forth, and the incapability of the nous to express with words what exactly man's heart feels at that moment. This initial contact with God is the product of this method

and way of prayer.

Now we will go back a little to examine what is required to successfully implement this method, and, subsequently, to arrive at this special meeting with God. The Prayer requires comprehensive support. A person must maintain

complete attentiveness in all facets of his spiritual life. If he is a disciple, his first obligation is to fulfill his obedience—in the strict sense of the term—as much as possible. He must pay attention to everything: he should execute all that he is taught by his elder

and do nothing that conflicts with his elder's will, desire, and life. The entire teaching of the spiritual elder is nothing other than a practical counsel, an interpretation, and a simplification of Christ's commandments. This is why the holy Fathers state, "He who

executes the commandments of his spiritual elder executes the commandments of Christ.”

The disciple must furthermore exert himself in every aspect of the spiritual life. For example, he cannot force himself to pray during the

night and then disperse what he has gained with purposeless talk, unnecessary conversations, and careless conduct during the day, thus ruining—to some extent—his obedience. In this case, he will resemble a person who milks a cow, collects

the milk in a container, but subsequently is careless, knocks the container over, and spills the milk. This person gained absolutely nothing, even though he went through the trouble of milking the cow.

If a person on the one hand struggles in an

attempt to acquire the Prayer and to become a spiritually successful and fortunate monk, but on the other hand is careless during the day by speaking idly and ushering into his mind thousands of unnecessary things, how can this poor man later collect his

thoughts when he sits to pray? He has deposited so much material within himself all day long; what type of prayer will he attain during the night? At that time, the devil, who has acquired many rights, will bring forward a multitude of intense images. The soul,

compromised by the defeat it suffered during the day, cannot overcome the difficulty it faces from the devil. Thus, the prayer is fruitless, the soul feels dry and empty, and a person wonders, “Why is this happening to me? Why am I not able to pray?” My dear fellow,

you have been disobedient, you have spoiled all your efforts, and you have made a mess of things!

During the time of prayer, a kind of mystery takes place. How can it not be a mystery? Words of love spring forth as the soul communicates

mystically, unexplainably, and, in a way, divinely with God. We hear words of prayer being recited, but we cannot convey exactly what is felt in the heart of the person who has spiritually succeeded in the Prayer. For this reason, we must pay

special attention to our preparation, to the comprehensive support that we must give to ourselves, to our nous, and to our heart, in order to succeed during the time of prayer.

Saint Isaac the Syrian teaches that even if we prepare ourselves fully,

God is not obligated to send us His grace. He advises the following: “O man, you should prepare yourself. But it is up to God if He decides to look upon you and send you His grace. Nevertheless, you must prepare yourself as best as humanly possible.” This is why

oftentimes a person prepares himself in every possible way and yet does not experience any special grace during prayer. This occurs, as we have already mentioned, so that man acquires firsthand knowledge that God will visit him only when He decides. Man

must be prepared: his vessel must be empty, clean, open on top, and waiting for God to send His blessing.

When, however, the vessel is filthy and the lid is closed shut, even if God wants to send His grace, where can He possibly place it? In

which vessel can He deposit this immaculate substance? In this manner, man renders himself unworthy. This is why Christ tells us in the Holy Gospel to clean “the inside of the cup” (Mt. 23:26), so that the outside may also become clean. If the vessel is clean, we

will receive the grace of God; simultaneously, the grace of God will also be apparent in our body—the purity of the soul will become manifest throughout the bodily members. It will be noticeable just as it is in spiritual people who have grace shining on their

face and all over their entire persona. This grace is tangible and evident proof that a person is spiritual. And when we say spiritual, we are referring to a person who has succeeded in prayer and acquired God's grace.

My ever-memorable elder would teach us these

and many other things. His life was nothing other than a sustained effort to say the Prayer. When I served him, specifically when I would take him his coffee at sunset (which provided him with a boost of energy for his vigil), he would not permit me to say even one

word to him. I would bring him his coffee and with his glance he would motion me to leave. He was in a state of preparation prior to entering his cell for his vigil. During the summer, of course, he would be outside. Later he would enter his cell and prepare

himself by praying and contemplating the things we mentioned earlier. Just as he entered into his dark cell, this is how he would enter into his heart for hours and occupy himself with things "only known to God."

Oftentimes when I would exit my cell before

him (because I was and still am weaker), I would hear him chanting mournful and compunctious hymns from the tonsure service of the Great and Angelic Schema or from the Funeral Service. Thus, he would add another mood and tone to his vigil. In

this manner, he would allow his mind to rest briefly, and in following, only he and God knew how he spent his time in prayer. Oftentimes he would enter his cell at sunset and remain inside until after midnight. Afterwards, he would exit his cell and take hold of

the prayer rope in order to complete the service [82] and his prayer rule: the obligations that every monk must fulfill. However, he would dedicate most of his time during the vigil entirely to prayer with the name of Christ and direct contact with God.

Afterwards, he would also carry out the formal part of his prayer rule.

This entire practical teaching of the elder must become a beacon toward prayer for us. For this reason, we must firstly strive to satisfy the comprehensive requirements for the

Prayer. If we err here, we will not succeed in prayer. We should not be sidetracked during the day with unnecessary things. We should work carefully and say the Prayer, as the elder has taught us. Since during the day our mind is distracted with work, it is

more beneficial for the novice to repeat the Jesus Prayer verbally as he works. Of course, praying in this manner during the day is not as productive as praying in stillness during the appointed time at night, when we attain eighty or one hundred percent, so to speak,

success. Nevertheless, we can yield a fifty or thirty percent profit. The purpose of uttering the Prayer as we work, of the verbal invocation during the day, is to aid us in our primary prayer during the night. Consequently, it is crucial for us to pray verbally during the day

and to guard our five senses—especially our mouth.

We should not make unnecessary comments. We should not disobey the directions we have received from the elder. Our elder advises us, “My child, do not speak idly. Do not engage in

unnecessary conversations. Do not enter your brother's cell, since you have been instructed not to talk idly." However, when you enter another cell and begin to speak idly about unnecessary things you violate your obedience, you transgress the

commandment, you ruin the initial mandatory preparation and, consequently, the Prayer as well. Then you come and complain, “I don’t have any success when I pray. I feel empty inside.” Yes, but look at what led you to this condition!

When a disciple does

not pay careful attention to all these guidelines, he subsequently does not prosper during prayer. This is why I advise you to watch over your thoughts. When various thoughts (stemming from the passions) begin to assault you, stay focused on the Jesus Prayer as you

repeat it verbally, and ignore them completely. Hold on to the Prayer, ignore the evil thoughts, and behold, we make a correct beginning, set a good foundation, provide comprehensive help to our soul and our prayer, and thus walk straight toward our goal. This is

not difficult. The spiritual struggle is never difficult or laborious when we proceed in this manner. After an initial small amount of effort, a person will feel rest internally. Is it hard to refrain from speaking excessively to our brother and to voice the Prayer instead? What

you will experience, my child, after guarding your senses and praying is truly inexplicable.

When we were living with my elder, we received these same instructions from him, and, with his blessing, we attempted to execute everything precisely.

There was a brother who, having kept all of the elder's suggestions, would water the ground with tears even when using the bathroom. When he would lie down, he couldn't fall asleep on account of the profuse tears. As soon as he would open his eyes, the

memory of death was the first thing to appear. No matter what he did, his mind was occupied with spiritual contemplation. Behold the result of executing obedience. Was it tiring for this person to cry and shed tears? No. It was a blessing from God; rather, it was the ensuing

crop from the cultivation and application of the commandments and the toil of obedience. These tears would flow as a bountiful harvest—essentially, they were tears of spiritual elation.

Even during the day when a person is occupied with a job that demands

his attention, the grace of God never ceases visiting him, as long as he keeps in mind the precepts of obedience. When a disciple adheres to these rules and experiences the benefit, it is impossible for him not to taste divine blessings and grace in abundance. It is

impossible for him not to come into direct contact and not to achieve this spiritual union with God and his elder's soul. To say it simply, this spiritual union is nothing other than the grace of God that is experienced in the soul of the disciple who struggles.

Saint Symeon the New Theologian did not study theology in any university. He studied theology in a monastery via perfect obedience to and faith in his spiritual father. Thereafter, he received the entire theology of the Holy Spirit as a reward. This is

why all his theology became totally accepted by the learned theologians as true, even though, in many aspects, they could not fully grasp the depth of theological meanings perceived by this God-inspired theologian. He may have expressed himself theologically;

however, it was not possible for the depth and expanse of his theological understanding and comprehension to be put in writing.

What remains for us now is to force ourselves to execute all the things we have said, through the grace of God and the

prayers of the elder. It is not at all difficult; it is extremely easy. When someone speaks excessively, he becomes tired. When someone remains silent, something beneficial takes place internally. One becomes spiritually content as he preoccupies himself with

divine contemplation, which leads to rest for the soul. Is it difficult, therefore, for someone to remain silent and keep his obedience when he knows that obedience will lead him to such a splendid spiritual state? If death comes during the night or day, he will achieve his

eternal goal and will be ranked among the angels before the Throne of God! Up there, he will be a member of the angelic rank, and he will chant mystical and unfathomable hymns along with the angels eternally before the Throne of God!

And so, the person who labors a little in order to achieve these states becomes ecstatic and is filled with such love that his heart embraces all his fellow men. The person who loves in this manner feels blissful. Conversely, the person who is void of

love suffers internally; he is embittered and poisoned.

When we stray from implementing obedience —which is a simplification of God's commandments—we err, we feel embittered, we become deficient, we do not advance, and we do

not become spiritually fortunate. Consequently, we must exert ourselves and struggle; by doing so, our struggle will bring forth spiritual fruit. The reason we came here is to change the internal man.

We have our elder, who is a modern-day saint with a contemporary

teaching, who is now watching us from up above in Heaven. He is looking to see what we are doing, if we are emulating his life and his words. Of course, we cannot attain his way of life or his spiritual state. Nevertheless, we can in part, and to some extent,

follow his example.

"Christ is the same yesterday, today, and unto the ages" (Heb. 13:8), states the Apostle Paul. Let us struggle, therefore, to say the Prayer during the day. Whoever is able to say it with his mind may do so, whereas it is better for the beginners to

say it verbally. Everyone should carry out his ministry as if serving God and the angels (the angels being our brothers). You should remember that talking idly is an evil because it clouds man's mind and makes prayer during the night difficult. Along with the Prayer,

you can reflect on many other spiritually beneficial thoughts. While in church, patiently remain in your stasidi.[83] You should not move around easily, unless it is absolutely necessary. When the talanton[84] sounds, we should

assemble in church just as the various animals came together and entered the ark when Noah hit the kopano,[85] in order to be saved from the flood. We also escape the cataclysm of sin by running to church because when we are all together we unite our prayers and receive

courage. My prayer may be weak, but my brother's is strong; thus, my prayer will ascend with his prayer. The angel who comes to his aid will be of help to me also. The tempter, who would otherwise draw near me on account of my culpability, will be

warded off by the angel's presence and leave. "One brother aided by another is like a fortressed city" (Pr. 18:19).

[1] This is a hymn referred to as the *Exapostilarion,* which is chanted on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of Holy Week.

[2] The word γνόφος = "darkness" was used to describe the way in which God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai: "And Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was"

(Ex. 20:21). The darkness that appeared on Mount Sinai represents God's invisible and incomprehensible nature, as David says, "He bowed the heavens and came down, and thick darkness was under His feet" (Ps. 17:9) (St. Nicodemos, *Ἑρμηνεία εἰς τὰς 14 Ἐπιστολὰς τοῦ Ἀποστόλου Παῦλου {Interpretation of the*

14 Epistles of Apostle Paul}, Thessaloniki: Orthodoxos Kypseli, 1986, Vol. 3, p. 723). St. Dionysios the Areopagite equates the divine darkness with the 'unapproachable light' (1 Tim. 6:16) where God is said to dwell (*Patrologia Migne*, Vol. 3, Fifth Epistle to Dorotheos, p. 1073). In the Old Testament, God

appeared as darkness to Moses on Mount Sinai. In the New Testament, God appears as inapproachable light to the Apostles on Mount Tabor. Both the unapproachable light (on account of its super brilliance) and the darkness (on account of its super darkness) are equally unable to be seen by the human eyes

(St. Nicodemos, Interpretation of the 14 Epistles of Apostle Paul, Vol. 3, p. 275). Thus, the "super-brilliant darkness of the unknowing of God" can be understood as follows: Even though God is seen as light and made known through His energies, His nature and essence remain concealed and

incomprehensible.

[3] Noetically: that is, when the soul imagines and feels that she is standing before Christ, and beseeches Him with pain, humility, and contrition to forgive her many transgressions.

[4] According to the holy Fathers, the devil battles man both from the left and from the right. He battles us from

the left when he assaults us directly with the irrational passions such as anger and desire, or for example by inciting us to fornicate, steal, and blaspheme, all of which are clearly evil. He battles us from the right when he attacks us subtly and indirectly with ideas that initially seem "right," good, and beneficial, when in

reality they are not. For example, when he gives us the desire to fast excessively. Realize dear reader that we are attacked with many more arrows of sin from the right than from the left, as the Psalms confirm: “A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right” (Ps. 90:7). In this verse, the word “side” is used by David to

mean “left.” This is because the devil knows that most people do not accept his evil assaults with apparent and obvious sins; thus, he begins to battle us with causes that seem good in order to ultimately hurl us into obvious evil as well (St. Nicodemos, *Ἑρμηνεία εἰς τοὺς 150 Ψαλμοὺς τοῦ Δαβίδ {An Interpretation of the 150*

Psalms of David}, Thessaloniki: Orthodoxos Kypseli, 1981, Vol. 2, pp. 555-556).

[5] From the absolution prayers found in the *Euchologion*, which is a prayer book for priests.

[6] Although the term "Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts" is more accurate, this service is more commonly

referred to as the Presanctified Liturgy. In place of the Cherubic hymn, the following hymn is chanted: “Now the Powers of Heaven minister invisibly with us. For, behold, the King of Glory enters. Behold, the mystical sacrifice, fully accomplished, is ushered in. In fervent faith let us draw near, that we

may become sharers in everlasting life. Alleluia."

[7] The Entrance Hymn chanted once a year on Holy and Great Saturday during the Liturgy of St. Basil the Great is: "Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and stand in fear and trembling, and think of nothing earthly. For the King of kings, and the Lord of lords, comes to be slain,

to give Himself as food to the faithful! Before Him go the choirs of angels with all the principalities and powers, the many-eyed cherubim and the six-winged seraphim, which cover their faces as they sing this hymn: Alleluia."

[8] This does not mean that God stops loving a person; rather, it is man himself who

cannot feel the love of God within him when he does not keep His commandments. St. John the Evangelist of Love confirms this with the following words: “No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us” (1 Jn. 4:12). Commenting on this verse, St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite

says, “Here, the great Theologian wants to show us that even though God’s nature and essence are unable to be seen and remain invisible, nevertheless, God becomes experienced and visible through His grace and energies because according to theologians, for them who are worthy and pure the vision of God is to

participate with God. … Our love for our brothers draws God's love to us. The more our love for others increases, the more God's love for us increases correspondingly. … According to St. Augustine, God is a mirror: depending on the face we have, this is the face He shows us, and whatever disposition we have toward

our brothers, this same disposition God shows to us" (*Ἑρμηνεία εἰς τὰς 7 Καθολικὰς Ἐπιστολὰς τῶν Ἁγίων Ἀποστόλων {Interpretation of the 7 General Epistles of the Holy Apostles}*, Thessaloniki: Orthodoxos Kypseli, 1986, pp. 574-577). Since negligence and indolence are characteristic and expressive

of indifference and absence of love (because he who loves wants to constantly think of, be with, and express his love with action for the beloved person), indeed they do not allow man's heart to feel and be warmed by the love of God. That man's negligence and indifference for God and His commandments prevent

God's love from reaching and remaining within man is further communicated by the following verses: "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him" (Jn. 14:21). "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word;

and My Father will love him, and We will come unto him and make Our abode with him" (Jn. 14:23). "For the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me" (Jn. 16:27). "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 Jn. 2:15). "But whoever has this world's goods and sees his brother in need and shuts up

his heart from him, how can the love of God abide in him?" (1 Jn. 3:17).

[9] The body is inferior to the soul because the soul was appointed to rule and govern the body, whereas the body is a servant and subjugate of the soul. Hence, the body does whatever the soul chooses and desires, just like the melody that is produced

by a musical instrument does not come from the instrument itself but from the musician who plays the instrument. Moreover, you should realize, dear reader, that the word “body” or “flesh” further signifies not the nature and essence of the body itself, but rather the earthly and materialistic mindset of man, just as the

word “soul” or “spirit” refers to the spiritual mindset of them who desire the heavenly things: “For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace” (Rom. 8:6). This is what the Apostle Paul refers to when he says, “For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death

the deeds of the body, you will live" (Rom. 8:13). Note how the Apostle Paul advises us to mortify not the body itself, but the evil and sinful actions that take place with the body (St. Nicodemos, *Interpretation of the 14 Epistles of Apostle Paul*, Orthodoxos Kypseli: Thessaloniki, 1986, Vol. 1, pp. 170-171; 182-183; 187-

188).

[10] Noetic refers to the soul's inherent mental ability to reason and understand. God created man with His own hands from visible and invisible nature, in His image and likeness. He fashioned the body from the earth, and through His own inbreathing gave man a rational and noetic soul—

what we call the divine image. The phrase "in His image" refers to the soul's noetic character and free will; whereas, "in His likeness," to the soul's ability to become like God in virtue, as much as possible (St. John of Damaskos, *Ἔκδοσις Ἀκριβὴς τῆς Ὀρθοδόξου Πίστεως {An Exact Exposition on the*

Orthodox Faith}, Thessaloniki: Pournara, 1998, p. 150).

[11] The rational part of the soul operates in two ways: through the inner voice and the spoken word. The inner voice is an activity of the soul that takes place in man's intellect without anything being verbalized. Thus, oftentimes we remain

silent but within us we deliberate and speak with our mind. This is precisely what renders all humans rational; for people who are born deaf or who lose their hearing or their ability to speak from some illness are no less rational [than people who can speak]. Spoken word or speech is expressed with sounds when we converse,

and with words that are uttered through the tongue and mouth. This is why it is called verbal (St. John of Damaskos, *Ἔκδοσις Ἀκριβὴς τῆς Ὀρθοδόξου Πίστεως {An Exact Exposition on the Orthodox Faith}*, Pournara: Thessaloniki, 1998, p. 170).

[12] The word ascesis is most often used to refer specifically to the austere

mode of life implemented by monks and hermits. Sometimes it is used to denote the monastic life itself. In a broader sense, ascesis is also the practice of a pious and devout life, or any spiritual exercise and discipline (such as prayer and fasting) that is carried out by all Christians.

[13] The Apostle Paul uses

the term “old man” three times in his Epistles: “That our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with” (Rom. 6:6). “That you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts” (Eph. 4:22). “Since you have put off the old man

with his deeds" (Col. 3:9). The Apostle uses this term to denote the evil, the corrupt desires, and, in general, the former sinful lifestyle of man prior to espousing the Christian Faith (St. Nicodemos, *Ἑρμηνεία εἰς τὰς 14 Ἐπιστολὰς τοῦ Ἀποστόλου Παῦλου {Interpretation of the 14 Epistles of Apostle Paul}*, Thessaloniki: Orthodoxos

Kypseli, 1990, Vol. 2, p. 696).

[14] The aerial toll-houses are groups of demons stationed in the air who accuse, demand accountability, and try to prevent the soul's ascent toward Heaven once it departs from the body. Many saints have spoken about these toll-houses. St.

Nicodemos the Hagiorite teaches the following when commenting on the verse, "according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2): "The righteous father, St. Symeon of the Wondrous Mountain, understood the devil to be the ruler who has authority in the air because

he stands in the sky and impedes souls from ascending into the heavens after death. His exact words are: ‘The divine Apostle teaches us that the devil sits high above as a judge when he states ‘according to the prince of the power of the air who now works in the sons of disobedience.’ The Apostle himself passed

through the air when he was transported—either with his body or without his body—into the third heaven, and, having seen the one who wages war against the souls in the air, described the above.' In following, the saint says that the demons who are responsible for each passion, these same demons examine each soul as it

ascends, and they judge her before the gates of Heaven. This same opinion (i.e., that there exist different toll-houses of demons in the air who examine the souls as they ascend upward) is confirmed by the lives of St. Anthony the Great and St. Makarios the Great" *(Ἑρμηνεία εἰς τὰς 14 Ἐπιστολὰς τοῦ Ἀποστόλου*

Παῦλου {Interpretation of the 14 Epistles of Apostle Paul}, Thessaloniki: Orthodoxos Kypseli, 1990, Vol. 2, p. 384). St. John Chrysostom says the following in one of his homilies: "At that time [of the soul's departure] we are in need of many prayers, of many good deeds, of much protection from the angels, and of much

guidance as we ascend through the air … of assistants and guides to safeguard us and help us cross through the rulers and authorities and the invisible rulers of the world of the air, which the Holy Scriptures refer to as persecutors and publicans and tax collectors" (*Patrologia Migne*, Vol. 60, pp. 727-730). St. Anastasios

of Sinai says the following in a talk addressed to the departed: “Then the angels take the soul and travel up through the air, where the rulers, authorities, and rulers of the world of the opposing powers stand: they who accuse us bitterly, the harsh publicans who demand an account, the tax-collectors who are met in the air. They

accuse and examine, showing their records and man's sins that have been committed during youth and old age, voluntary and involuntary, with actions, words, and thoughts. The wretched soul immensely fears and trembles. The need the soul has at that time is indescribable as she is stopped, slandered, and

impeded by the multitude and myriad of her enemies, so as to prevent her from ascending to the heavens, so that she does not go dwell in the light and the land of the living" (*Μαργαρίται {Pearls}*, Thessaloniki: Rigopoulos, 1979, p. 236). St. Seraphim of Sarov, the great intercessor of the Russian people, related the

following event: “Two nuns fell asleep in the Lord. Both of them had served as Abbesses. The Lord revealed to me that they had difficulty as their souls were passing through the aerial toll-houses. I, the lowly one, began praying for three consecutive days and nights beseeching the Mother of God for their salvation. The

compassion of the Lord, through the intercessions of the Panagia, finally showed mercy on them. They passed through the aerial toll-houses and received forgiveness of their sins" (*Ὅσιος Σεραφεὶμ τοῦ Σάρωφ {St. Seraphim of Sarov}*, Oropos: Holy Monastery of Paraklitos, 1998, p. 232). Contemporary and universally accepted

scholars of the Orthodox Church such as Professor Panagiotis Trembelas and Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlahos likewise accept the toll-house tradition as an authentic teaching of the Church. In his book *Orthodox Dogmatics, Vol. 3*, Dr. Trembelas demonstrates that this is a cohesive and continuous teaching

“unanimously voiced with the mouths of all the fathers” (Athens: Sotir, 1979, pp. 376-379). And Metropolitan Hierotheos concludes his chapter entitled “The Taxing of Souls” thus: “When we examine the toll-houses in these theological frames, the use of this teaching is not inappropriate. But if we have other conceptions, we are on

the wrong path" (*Life After Death,* Levadia: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 2005, pp. 62-80).

[15] The schema, usually called the "great schema" or "angelic schema," is the habit of a fully tonsured monk.

[16] The word "pure" is used to describe the person who is clean and free of sin, in

general. However, it also has the specific meaning of purity from filthy carnal sins. Purity of the body is maintained when man remains free from sins such as adultery, fornication, and masturbation; whereas, purity of the soul is preserved when man does not view indecent photographs, watch

inappropriate movies, read obscene literature, or lend an ear to vulgar jokes and narratives, and when man resists and spurns sinful carnal images that appear in his imagination. Our God and Savior desires purity of both the body and the soul from His followers. As St. John the Evangelist and Beloved Disciple of Christ

states, “Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 Jn. 3:3).

[17] This verse is from a hymn (in 3rd Tone) found in the Funeral Service as well as the *Paraklitiki*. The entire hymn is: “All the things associated with man’s life that cease to exist after death are vanity. Wealth does not

remain; fame does not follow. When death comes, all these things vanish. Therefore beloved, let us cry out to our King and God: Give rest to the person who has departed from us, O Lover of man."

[18] "Particularly for every Christian" because, "The least is pardoned in mercy, but the powerful shall be

strongly examined" (WSol. 6:6). And as Christ stated: "That servant who knew his master's will, but neither prepared himself nor did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. … For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will

ask more" (Lk. 12:47-48). And the Apostle Paul also mentions: "Who [Christ] is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe" (1 Tim. 4:10).

[19] St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite teaches the following when commenting on the verse, "Yet Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil

disputed about the body of Moses … said, 'The Lord rebuke thee'" (Jude 1:9): "What do we learn from this event? That during the time of death and the separation of the soul from the body, the devil comes to oppose and lay claim to the soul. Both angelic powers and a multitude of demons come to meet the soul and examine

each person's deeds. If a person has good deeds, the angels take the soul; if they are evil, the demons take it. At that time, each soul is overcome by uncertainty and fear because the devil attempts to impede it from ascending into the heavens. The angels, on the other hand, help the soul, just as St. Anthony the Great saw

during his vision and as we read in the life of St. Makarios. … These abominable spirits are envious when they see the souls of mortal and physical humans ascending to the places of repose, while they remain in places of suffering and confinement. They can't stand to see humans inheriting their former

dwelling place in Heaven, while they themselves inherit the darkness of Hades and the eternal fire of Hell. St. John Climacos also confirms that there is a fearsome debate that takes place at the time of death with his narration of righteous Stephen who dwelled on Mount Sinai (Step 7). If the devil was present during the

death of a God-seer, law-giver, king, priest, and archpriest like Moses who saw the back of God, tenaciously contending and disputing [about the body of Moses], what will happen to us the sinners? But what am I saying? If the shameless devil had the nerve to approach the very Master of Moses, the completely

sinless Lord, during the time of His passion, hoping to find even a small flaw, as Christ Himself attested, 'The ruler of this world is coming, and he has nothing in Me' (Jn. 14:30), who can believe that we will be exempt from the devil's presence at the hour of death? St. Basil the Great confirms the above as well: 'Just before the end of

their life, the brave athletes of God, who have fought against and escaped all the traps of the invisible enemies, are examined by the ruler of the present age. If they are found to have wounds or stains, or imprints of sin, he attempts to apprehend them; if, however, they are found unharmed and unblemished, they are free,

unable to be detained, and granted rest by Christ’” (*Ἑρμηνεία εἰς τὰς 7 Καθολικὰς Ἐπιστολὰς τῶν Ἁγίων Ἀποστόλων {Interpretation of the 7 General Epistles of the Holy Apostles}*, Thessasloniki: Orthodoxos Kypseli, pp. 696-698). And St. John Chrysostom affirms: “Not only the souls of the

righteous [are taken by angels], but also the souls of them who have lived in evil are led there [to Hades] by evil angels. And this becomes evident from another rich man, that is the foolish rich man, to whom God said, 'This night they demand your soul from you' (Lk. 12:20). In this manner, concerning Lazarus it is said

that ‘he was taken up by angels’ (Lk. 16:22); concerning the foolish rich man, that certain fearsome powers demanded his soul … . And they [the demons] took one [the rich man] captive, while the others [the angels] revolved around the second [Lazarus] as a crowned victor” (*Patrologia Migne*, Vol. 48,

p. 984).

[20] A skete is a community that consists of a number of independent houses with a centralized church. This setting allows relative isolation for the monks but also affords them with communal services and shared resources. It combines communal life found in monasteries with

the austere program of hermits.

[21] The hymn in its entirety reads thus: “Having risen from sleep, we fall before Thee, O good One, and sing to Thee, mighty One, the angelic hymn: Holy, holy, holy art Thou, O God. Through the prayers of the Theotokos, have mercy on us.”

[22] The Trisagion Service or "Thrice-Holy Service" is so-called because it begins with the familiar prayer, "Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us." After this initial prayer, four hymns are chanted with which we fervently ask of the Lord to give rest to the deceased. In following, the priest prays to the "God of

spirits and of all flesh," that is, to the God of the angels and of all human beings, to accept the departed soul in Paradise (N. Vassiliadis, *The Mystery of Death,* Athens: The Savior, 1993, pp. 354-355).

[23] According to many holy Fathers, there are seven deadly sins that give rise to all other sins: pride, love of

money, sexual immorality, envy, gluttony, anger, and indifference. Additionally, there are certain sins, which originate from the above seven, that are also termed "deadly" on account of their severity. Such are: blasphemy, murder, abortion, witchcraft, adultery, and not forgiving others. Note, however, that

several fathers, as well as the fifth canon of the Seventh Ecumenical Synod, understand sin which is "unto death" (1 Jn. 5:16) to mean any sin for which we do not repent and take the steps to rectify.

[24] The word eros is synonymous with "love." It is used frequently by the holy Fathers to denote man's

burning love for God, Christ, and divine things, which is pure, holy, and free of all sensuality (*A Patristic Greek Lexicon,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). St. Ignatios would often repeat, "My eros has been crucified; my love has died." This is how he referred to our Lord Jesus Christ.

[25] *The Lives of the Desert*

Fathers is a collection of sayings and narratives written about the Desert Fathers (that is, the early monastic founders) of the Egyptian desert.

[26] The Monastery of Simonopetra lies on the southern coast of the Mount Athos peninsula. It is built on and practically hangs from the edge of a cliff

1,000 feet above sea level.

[27] The unnatural carnal sins practiced in these cities were sexual intercourse involving anal or oral copulation, predominantly between men: “The men of the city, the Sodomites … surrounded the house. Thus they called to Lot and said to him, ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight?

Bring them out to us that we may have relations with them’” (Gen. 19:4-11). This is why these sins are referred to as “sodomy” even until today. Furthermore, sodomy can be committed between a man and a man, or between a man and a woman. These sins are unnatural because nowhere in nature is any species of animal found to

carry out such actions, since, according to the universal conviction even of biologists, the purpose of mating is for reproduction. Also know, dear reader, that these sins are not permitted whether it be between two men, between a man and a woman who are not married, or between a man and his wife within marriage, and

that people who fall into these sins are impeded from receiving Holy Communion as specified by the Canons of the Orthodox Church (St. Nicodemos, *Exomologetarion: A Manual of Confession*, Thessaloniki: Uncut Mountain Press, 2006, pp. 241, 260-263).

[28] The noun "hypostasis" and the adjective

"hypostatic" are used to describe the substantive existence or subsistent entity of each of the three persons or individuals of the Holy Trinity (*A Patristic Greek Lexicon,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 1456). St. John of Damaskos says, "We believe in one God, one origin without beginning, uncreated,

unchanging, immortal, eternal, infinite, indescribable, omnipotent, simple, bodiless, invisible, the source of goodness and righteousness … the cause of all good things, one essence, one divinity, one power, one desire, one action, one beginning, one authority, one strength, one kingdom, recognized and worshipped

in three perfect hypostases … which is indeed inexplicable … There is truly one God: God [the Father] and the Logos [the Son] and His Spirit" (*Ἔκδοσις Ἀκριβὴς τῆς Ὀρθοδόξου Πίστεως {An Exact Exposition on the Orthodox Faith}*, Thessaloniki: Pournara, 1998, pp. 47-49 & 62). The holy Fathers teach

that several verses in the Old Testament declare the existence of the Holy Trinity. Such examples are, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). "Behold, the man has become like one of Us" (Gen. 3:22). "Come, let Us go down and confuse their language" (Gen. 11:7). "The

Lord rained brimstone and fire on Sodom … from the Lord" (Gen. 19:24).

[29] Blasphemy is, by definition, to speak in such a way as to harm or insult God's good name and fame. However, in this homily, blasphemy specifically refers to the appalling and vulgar words used to curse and swear at God, the Panagia,

and the Saints. This is unfortunately a demonic habit prevalent amongst the Greek people.

[30] Panagia, which means "the all-holy one," is a name ascribed to the Virgin Mary. It is derived from the Greek words *πᾶν* = all, and *ἁγία* = holy.

[31] St. Theodora, who is commemorated on February

11th, was the Empress and wife of Emperor Theophilos the iconoclast. She venerated the sacred icons in secret. The Emperor was punished as an example to others in the following way: He became severely ill with dysentery and neared death. While in excruciating pain, his mouth stretched so wide open that his insides became

visible. Then he was able to take a breath and voiced, "Woe to me the wretch! I am being beaten on account of the holy icons!" *(Ὁ Μέγας Συναξαριστὴς τῆς Ὀρθοδόξου Ἐκκλησίας {The Great Synaxaristes of the Orthodox Church}*, Athens: Langis, 1994, Vol. 2, p. 293).

[32] The "raso" is the black ankle length outer garment

worn by Orthodox monastics. It is also the traditional outer garment of Orthodox bishops, priests, and deacons.

[33] This liturgical vestment is worn by priests and bishops of the Orthodox Church whenever they perform a mystery. It is worn around the neck with its two ends hanging approximately

to the ankles, a symbol of the grace of the Holy Spirit that flows forth as a stream from the priest unto the faithful. After a person makes his confession, the priest places the epitrachelion over his head and reads him the Prayer of Absolution.

[34] "Papa" in Greek means "priest," and it is used as a

title to address priests.

[35] All the holy Fathers of the Orthodox Church practiced watchfulness; however, the holy Fathers who taught, detailed, and systematized this method and "science" that completely liberates man from sinful thoughts, words, and deeds constitute a special group of men referred to as the

"Watchful Fathers." The collective writings of these Watchful Fathers have been compiled by St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite and St. Makarios of Corinth in their monumental work entitled *The Philokalia of the Watchful Fathers*.

[36] Watchfulness, according to St. Hesychios the Priest, is a method and science that

completely frees man—with God's help—from sinful thoughts, words, and actions, when a person implements it continuously over time. It consists primarily of watching and examining the thoughts and images that come to mind—as soon as they appear—and dismissing them immediately. Means that help us exercise

watchfulness and destroy evil thoughts include the following: calling upon the name of Jesus Christ with humility, remembrance of death, and remembering that we will be judged by Christ (*Φιλοκαλία τῶν ἱερῶν Νηπτικῶν {Philokalia}*, Thessaloniki: To Perivoli tis Panagias, 1998, Vol. 1, pp. 180-182).

[37] The nous (*νοῦς*) according to the holy Fathers is the "eye of the soul." "The soul," says St. John of Damaskos, "is a living entity that is simple, bodiless, invisible to the physical eyes, rational, noetic, and without form. It uses the body as an instrument, bestowing to it life, growth, perception, and birth. The

nous is not something separate from the soul but rather the clearest part of the soul. Just as the eye is part of the body, this is what the nous is for the soul" (*An Exact Exposition on the Orthodox Faith*, Thessaloniki: Pournara, 1998, p. 152). In Greek, the word nous also refers to the mind. In these series of

homilies, we have sometimes translated νοῦς as “mind,” and other times as “nous,” as demanded by the context of the original Greek text.

[38] Hidden work takes place within man’s soul and mind. This work for God includes prayer in order to ask for His help, resisting and disregarding evil thoughts and images, using self-

reproach to humble our mindset, remembering the accomplishments of the Saints and Paradise in order to fuel our zeal for keeping the Divine commandments, recalling Hell in order to curb our sinful desires and urges, remembering the Lord's countless blessings bestowed on us and ceaselessly thanking Him,

praying for others in order to demonstrate our love and concern for them, using the living creations and inanimate universe to marvel and praise God for His wisdom and providence. This hidden work is necessary, as attested by Christ Himself: “Take heed, watch and pray … . It is like a man going to a far country,

who left his house, and gave … to each person his work, and commanded the doorkeeper [i.e., the mind] to watch" (Mk. 13:33-34). Moreover, this hidden work has exceeding value in the sight of God, as confirmed by the Apostle Peter, "Rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a

meek and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God" (1 Pt. 3:4).

[39] Pascha is a transliteration of the Greek word *Πάσχα*, which is itself a transliteration of the Hebrew *pesach*, which means Passover. The Jewish Passover was a foreshadowing of the Christian Pascha. The Jews

celebrated Passover to commemorate their Exodus from Egyptian slavery into the promised land; the Christians celebrate Pascha to commemorate their exodus from the slavery of the devil into the heavenly and eternal Kingdom of God. Moses led the Jews out of bondage; Christ leads the Christians out of the bonds

of sin and death. In the Old Testament, the Jews would sacrifice a lamb each year; in the New Testament, God sacrificed His Son, the Lamb of God.

[40] The Greek word "geronda" (γέροντα) is synonymous with "elder." It is a title predominantly used to address the abbot of a monastery. It is also used to

address a monk endowed with the gift of spiritual direction.

[41] St. Philaretos is commemorated on December 1st. If you can, dear reader, read this saint's life, and you will be greatly edified.

[42] "There is no repentance" for the condemned soul itself. The intent of this verse is to reveal the inability of

departed souls to alter their moral state *on their own accord*—because the contest has ended, the race has finished, and the body (which was required to advance toward virtue and perfection, which would have rendered the soul god-like through the works of repentance, and through which man's repentance

would have been manifested in deed) has been separated from the soul and decomposed to its elemental constituents. Hence, the meaning of this verse is more accurately captured if reworded thus: “In Hades [or, after death], repentance is ineffective.” This saying does not in any way conflict with or invalidate our

prayers and memorial services offered by the Church, through which we expect the deceased souls to receive benefit—not through their own action, volition, repentance, or suffering, but rather through God's grace alone. (St. Nektarios, *Περὶ τῆς Ἀθανασίας τῆς Ψυχῆς, καὶ Περὶ τῶν Ἱερῶν Μνημοσύνων {Concerning*

the Immortality of the Soul and Memorial Services}, Athens: Agios Nicodemos, 1972, pp. 83-84).

[43] Some of the difficulties that Christ, as a human being, endured were: the persecution from Herod and His flight to Egypt shortly after He was born; slander from the Scribes and Pharisees; disbelief from His

fellow countrymen; betrayal from Judas; denial from Peter; blasphemy from the soldiers; insulting jeers and ridicule from the multitudes; the martyrdom of the crucifixion; the internal pain on account of His love and desire for the Jews to be saved; the sorrow due to the unbearable grief that ripped through the heart of His holy

Mother. Glory to Thee and Thy long-suffering, O Lord! Glory to Thee!

[44] Rebuttal is to resist and war against the passions and evil thoughts with hostility, by countering them with appropriate and suitable Scriptural verses (just as the Lord did to combat and crush the devil when he tried to tempt Him with the three

evils of hedonism, vainglory, and avarice (cf. Mt. 4:1-11)), or with proper reasoning and logical arguments that expose their falsehood and deception. Realize, dear reader, that even when rebuttal is used, it is still to our advantage to hold on to the name of Christ (i.e., to say "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me," either

mentally or verbally) because in this manner we will not only vanquish our enemies with the invincible weapon of Jesus' name but also avoid feeling prideful by attributing the victory to this almighty name of the Lord (St. Nicodemos, *Ἀόρατος Πόλεμος {Invisible Warfare}*, Athens: Agios Nicodemos, p. 39).

[45] The word logos (*λόγος* in Greek) means "word" or "speech." However, in the New Testament, Logos (*Λόγος*) is also used as a proper noun to refer to the second person of the Holy Trinity; that is, the Son and Word of God. St. John the Evangelist called Jesus Christ the Word of God (cf. Jn. 1:1; 1 Jn. 1:1; 1 Jn. 5:7;

Rev. 19:13) in order to reveal the relationship that exists between the Son and God the Father. It was through Divine inspiration that this term was ascribed to the Savior Christ because it accurately denotes and conveys both His eternal hypostasis as well as His association with the eternal Nous [Mind]. For, just as

speech that originates from the human mind is neither totally identical with nor completely different than the mind, similarly the Word of God exists as a hypostasis distinct from the Father but simultaneously is of the same nature as the Father. The name Logos can also be used to describe our Lord Jesus Christ since He

announced God's will and clarified the heavenly mysteries to humanity (St. Nektarios, *Εὐαγγελικὴ Ἱστορία {The Gospel Story}*, Athens: Agios Nicodemos, pp. 2-3).

[46] The Turkish occupation in Greece and the Balkans lasted from the fall of Constantinople on May 29, 1453 until the Greek

Revolution on March 25, 1821.

[47] The word “Platytera” (*Πλατυτέρα* in Greek) is an abbreviation for “Platytera ton Ouranon,” which means “Wider than the Heavens.” God is greater than the universe; yet He was contained within the womb of the Virgin Mary. Thus, the Theotokos (which means

"the birth-giver of God," derived form the Greek words Θεός = God + τόκος =childbirth) is indeed wider than the heavens.

[48] In Greek, the word megalynarion means "magnification." The megalynarion is a special hymn used specifically to extol or praise the Lord, the Mother of God, or His

Saints, and it is customarily chanted after the ninth ode of the Paraklesis service, after "It is truly meet …" in the Divine Liturgy, or instead of the ninth ode during the Orthros service on feast days of the Lord and the Panagia.

[49] This is a hymn chanted during Vespers and Orthros on the Sunday of the holy Fathers of the First

Ecumenical Council.

[50] “And do not be conformed to this [present] world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may discern the good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God” (Rom. 12:2), states the Apostle Paul. The mind is renewed when a person repents each time he sins, when he

struggles to decrease his sins, and strives to increase in virtue. In this manner, man is renewed as he changes for the better (St. Nicodemos, *Ἑρμηνεία εἰς τὰς 14 Ἐπιστολὰς τοῦ Ἀποστόλου Παῦλου {Interpretation of the 14 Epistles of Apostle Paul}*, Thessasloniki: Orthodoxos Kypseli, 1989, Vol. 1, p. 269).

[51] A monumental undertaking and accomplishment of St. Basil the Great was the establishment and operation of the social and philanthropic system that became known as Vasiliada (named after him). This center included a hospital, orphanage, senior citizens home, housing and medical

care for the indigent, the sick, and strangers. All these services were offered free of charge to everyone in need. This center was the first of its kind and served as a prototype for others to follow.

[52] Hymn from the1st Ode of the Canon of the Resurrection.

[53] Hymn from the1st Ode

of the Canon of the Resurrection.

[54] It is an oral tradition that "the tenth rank of angels that fell away from God will be replaced and filled by those monastics who will be saved. … This is why the devil, fueled by jealousy, opposes and wars against monasticism—because monastics (if they live

according to their vows) will occupy the place of light and glory which Lucifer had prior to his fall" *(Ὁ Μέγας Συναξαριστῆς τῆς Ὀρθοδόξου Ἐκκλησίας {The Great Synaxarion of the Orthodox Church},* Athens: Langis, 1992, Vol. 6, pp. 336-337). This exceptional position and glory that monastics will receive was revealed to St.

Paisios by St. Constantine the Great, who appeared to him and said, "I am Constantine, and I have come to reveal to you the glory which monastics enjoy in Heaven, as well as the closeness and boldness which they have with Christ. I envy you, O Paisios … whereas I blame and censure myself for not becoming part

of this honored rank of monks, and I cannot bear the loss." Then St. Paisios asked, "Don't you enjoy the splendid glory and divine radiance?" "Yes," responded St. Constantine, "But I have neither the same boldness as the monks nor equal honor with them. I have seen the souls of certain monks, when they were separated from

their bodies, soaring like eagles with much courage toward the heavens, and the opposing rank of demons did not dare to approach them at all. Then I witnessed the gates of Heaven opening and these souls entering and appearing before the Heavenly King, and standing with great boldness next to the throne of God" *(The*

Great Synaxarion, Vol. 6, p. 260). Similarly, St. Alypius often advised his mother to be tonsured a nun, because she lived in a convent; however, she repeatedly declined on account of humility, until God showed her the following vision: She saw the nuns chanting in church, from where an exceptional fragrance was

emerging. When she attempted to proceed to that area, a guard at the entrance did not allow her to enter, advising her that she could not join these servants of God since she had not yet received the angelic schema *(The Great Synaxarion,* Vol. 11, p. 652).

[55] According to the holy Fathers, “assault” is the

initial appearance of a sinful thought, image, or fantasy (that God despises), which comes to the mind after being sown in the heart by the devil.

[56] The *Triodion* is a book that contains the liturgical texts and hymns used by our Church in Her services during the special period that begins with the Sunday of

the Publican and the Pharisee and ends on Holy and Great Saturday.

[57] While conversing with Nicodemos, Christ spoke of His future crucifixion in the following manner: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not

perish but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:14-15). Moses raised and hung a brass serpent on a wooden pole when a great number of the Jewish people were dying from snake bites in the wilderness. If anyone who had been bitten by a snake looked at the suspended brass serpent, he would be healed (cf. Nm. 21:8-9). Christ is the "noetic

serpent" for the following reasons: 1. The brass serpent that was hung horizontally upon the vertical wooden pole formed a perfect image of the Cross; 2. Just as the brass serpent was devoid of poison, similarly Christ appeared with a human body but was devoid of sin; 3. Just as everyone who looked at the serpent avoided physical

death, everyone who believes in Christ is liberated from eternal death and is healed from demonic wounds; 4. Just as the devil used the serpent to conceal himself and to thus trick Eve, similarly Christ used the human nature as a lure to conceal His divinity and thus trick the devil, who assumed Christ to be only a human.

However, when he pounced on the bait, he was caught and fatally wounded by the hook of Divinity (St. Nicodemos, *Ἑορτοδρόμιον {Eortodromion}*, Thessaloniki: Orthodoxos Kypseli, 2002, Vol. 1, pp. 52-54 & 302).

[58] The meaning of this verse is, “the monk who is guided by an elder does not

have to worry about constantly sorting out and deciphering God's will because his elder does this for him." It is, in a way, similar to when a person has a legal advisor, a medical advisor, or a financial advisor. Such a person does not have to strain himself to make decisions based on his own knowledge, but rather

follows the recommendations of experts (assuming, of course, that he is consulting someone competent and trustworthy), and thus achieves his goals without difficulty and complications. St. John Climacos describes this truth in the following wonderful manner: “Obedience means to deposit our own discernment into the

rich discernment of our elder. … Obedience is to act without examining … to live without curiosity, not to worry about danger, not to be concerned with giving an account to God, not to fear death, to sail in the ocean without danger, to journey [through this life effortlessly] as though you are sleeping" (*Κλῖμαξ Ἰωάννου τοῦ*

Σιναϊτου {The Ladder of Divine Ascent}, Oropos: Holy Monastery of the Paraclete, 1984, Step 4:3-4).

[59] In Greek, "poimen" means "shepherd."

[60] The Jesus Prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me," is often referred to as simply "the Prayer."

[61] *The Ladder of Divine*

Ascent, Step 27:16

[62]Man will not become an angel by nature in the next life, for after the Second Coming all human beings will be resurrected with a new, spiritual body and thus be comprised of a soul and a body once more. However, they will resemble the angels on account of their angelic way of life. Just as the

angels, they will thereafter live with celibacy, ceaselessly worshiping and praising the Holy Trinity. This is how Christ stated this fact: "For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are *as the angels* of God in heaven" (Mt. 22:30). This is why monasticism, which is a life of celibacy, prayer, and

complete devotion to God, is referred to as the "angelic life." This is also one of the reasons why St. John the Forerunner is referred to as an angel in the Scriptures (vid. Mk. 1:2), and is often depicted with wings in Orthodox iconography.

[63] The Small Compline is an evening prayer service, which is read before retiring

for the night.

[64] The Orthros is a morning prayer service, receiving its name from the Greek word *ὄρθρος*, which means "morning," "dawn," or "day break." This service is also referred to as Matins.

[65] This compound word, comprised of the words *idio*, which means "own" or "distinct," and *rhythmic*,

denoting “rhythm,” is best translated as “self-regulating.” That is, a person makes his own decisions, regulates his life according to his own desires, and neither follows the advice of his elder nor the common way of life of the monastic brotherhood.

[66] The catholicon is the main church located at the

center of a monastery.

[67] Obedience to our spiritual fathers, dear reader, is necessary for all of us, monks and laymen alike. For the obedience we do to our spiritual father is directed to Christ Himself, as He stated to His disciples, “He who listens to you, listens to Me. And He who rejects you, rejects Me” (Lk. 10:16). The

Apostle Paul similarly exhorts us, “Obey those who rule over you [i.e., your priests and spiritual fathers], and be submissive to them, for they watch out for your souls” (Heb. 13:17). The ill-consequences of disobedience are documented in Holy Scriptures with the life of Saul, the prophet who placed a bandage over his

eyes, and Gehazi. Saul did not obey the prophet Samuel who commanded him to destroy everything he would seize (including every animal and man) from his battle with Amalik. Instead, he thought it would be better to keep a few of the clean animals in order to sacrifice them to God. Thus, he heard the following words from the

prophet Samuel: “Hearing is better than a good sacrifice and obedience is better than the fat of rams” (1 Kgs. 15:22), and the Lord rejected him from remaining king over Israel. The second prophet ordered a person to hit him; however, the stranger deemed it inappropriate and did not hit the prophet. Consequently, a

lion appeared and devoured this man: "Now a certain man of the sons of the prophets said to his neighbor by the word of the Lord, 'Strike me down.' But the man refused to strike him … Thus as soon as he left him, a lion found and killed him" (3 Kgs. 20:35-36). Gehazi secretly went to the Syrian Naaman, whom the prophet

Elisha had cured of leprosy, and asked him for silver and garments even though Elisha wanted nothing in return. After acting contrary to the will of his elder, he became full of leprosy: “Then Elisha said to him … ‘the leprosy of Naaman shall also cling to you and your seed forever.’ Thus he went out from his presence leprous, like snow”

(4 Kgs. 5:26-27) (St. Nicodemos, *Πνευματικὰ Γυμνάσματα {Spiritual Excercises}*, Thessaloniki: Rigopoulos, 1971, p 186).

[68] The obedience that Jesus Christ, the Lord and Master of all creation, showed is truly remarkable! For He not only obeyed His biological mother but even His stepfather Joseph, as St.

Luke the Evangelist states: “Then He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and He was submissive to them” (Lk. 2:51). Furthermore, as the Son of God, Christ obeyed His Heavenly Father unto death: “He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Php. 2:8).

"Though He was a Son," states the Apostle Paul, "yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered" (Heb. 5:8), in order to set an example for us.

[69] The "koukouli" is a black veil draped over the head covering worn by monks, hieromonks, archimandrites, and bishops.

[70] *The Ladder of Divine*

[71] The truth of these words can be seen in the life of a virtuous disciple named Marko, who was extremely obedient and a calligrapher. His Elder Silouanos loved him exceedingly on account of his obedience. This elder had eleven more disciples who were upset by the fact that he loved Marko more

than them. When this became known to other elders in the neighboring sketes, they went to Elder Silouanos and started blaming him for his conduct. The elder then took them and went to each of his disciples' cells one by one. Every time he knocked on their door, he said, "Brother so-and-so, come because I need you."

But not even one of them came out immediately to follow his elder. Finally, when they arrived at Marko's cell, he knocked on the door and called, "Marko." As soon as the disciple heard his elder's voice, he instantly leaped outside of the room. After his elder gave him directions and he had left to carry out

the request, Elder Silouanos asked the elders, “My fathers, where are the other brothers?” He then proceeded with them into the cell and examined the scroll Markos was writing on. They noticed that he had started to write out the letter “o,” but left it incomplete; for as soon as he heard his elder’s voice, he

immediately stopped. The other elders then said to Elder Silouanos, "Truly Geronda! We also love the disciple whom you love because God also loves him" (*Εἶπε Γέργων {Sayings of the Desert Fathers}*, Athens: Astir, 1992, p. 171).

[72] "The conscientious and sensible person desiring to enter monastic life," advises

St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite, "must first prudently and carefully search to find an experienced and discerning elder. Once he finds such a person … he henceforth should submit everything, including his will and beliefs, to the elder's judgment and wisdom" (*Spiritual Exercises*, p. 186). St. John Climacos similarly

instructs, “When we are about to bow our head before the Lord and entrust ourselves to another person with humility and with the primary intention of acquiring salvation, prior to entering [monasticism] … let us examine, scrutinize, and —if I may be permitted to say—test [the elder], so we do not fall into the hands of

a sailor instead of a captain, a patient instead of a physician, a person with passions instead of a person with dispassion. … However, after we enter the stadium of piety and submission, let us no longer examine our good trainer" (*Ladder of Divine Ascent*, p. 67). Realize, dear reader, that finding a good spiritual

father is just as important for laymen as it is for monastics. St. Nektarios writes, "Confession demands the discovery of a proficient and experienced physician. … Just as people do not reveal their physical ailments to just any ordinary person, but to them who are experienced in treating such diseases, similarly the confession of

sins should be made to them who are able to provide treatment. Therefore, we must be careful to search for experienced physicians who are capable of healing the wounds of the heart that has been injured by sins. … Just as the unskillful physician sends many people to the gates of Hades, similarly, the incompetent and imprudent

spiritual father sends many souls to Hades. Oh, what a terrible evil for someone to find death while seeking treatment" (*Repentance and Confession*, Roscoe: St. Nektarios Monastery, 2002, p. 31).

[73] This is part of the Prayer Behind the Ambon, which is read aloud by the priest outside the Holy Altar before

the icon of Christ toward the end of the Liturgy.

[74] Only God is omniscient. However, the demons know the evil thoughts they have instilled within us, and, to some extent, whether we appear to have accepted them.

[75] See footnote 62.

[76] This is a prayer read after

the Gospel reading during Orthros service on Sunday.

[77] The Greek word *ἁρπαγή* is used by the Apostle Paul to describe how the saved people will be taken up by clouds to meet the descending Lord Jesus "in the air" during the Second Coming, once the resurrection of the dead has taken place (cf. 1 Th. 4:17).

This same word is used by the Apostle Paul (vid. 2 Cor. 12:1-4) as well as the holy Fathers to describe the culminating state of prayer during which time the mind is “taken up” into heavenly realms and divine mysteries are revealed to it. This carrying of a person to another place or to another sphere of existence is

rendered in English as "rapture." Also realize, dear reader, that the term "rapture" is incorrectly understood by many heretical groups who falsely believe that the Lord—prior to His Second Coming—will take up certain faithful in the air in order for them to avoid a difficult period of tribulation on the earth

during the time of the Antichrist, while another group of people will be left behind on the earth to suffer. [78]

The word theoria (*θεωρία*) literally means "vision." Sometimes it is used to refer to spiritual contemplation and meditation of divine things that are initiated by man himself, through which man

ascends from the vision of the creation to the Creator; other times, it refers to the vision of the uncreated light and various divine mysteries that are revealed to man through the action and initiative of God. (St. Nicodemos, *Συμβουλευτικὸν Ἐγχειρίδιον {Handbook of Spiritual Counsel}*, Athens: N. Panagopoulos, 2001, pp.

241-243, 283). This word has been translated as “contemplation” or “meditation,” whenever it has the former meaning, whereas it has been translated as “theoria,” whenever it takes on the latter meaning.

[79] “If we consider,” says St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite, “the height of perfection that

God calls us to attain, even if we had made considerable progress on the road toward acquisition of virtue, even then we would certainly believe that we are still nowhere near her initial boundaries." This is why many holy Fathers refer to even the perfection of the saints as imperfect and deficient with the following

words: “The imperfect perfection of the perfect.” Thus, even the Apostle Paul calls himself imperfect and confesses that he has not attained anything: “Not that I have already attained or am already perfected … . Brethren, I do not consider myself to have laid hold [of perfection]” (Php. 3:12-13). To believe that we can never

attain perfection is what constitutes perfection, according to the same Apostle: “Therefore, let us, as many as are perfect, have this mind” (Php. 3:15) (*Ἀόρατος Πόλεμος {Unseen Warfare}*, Athens: Agios Nicodemos, p. 143).

[80] Trisagion is a Greek word derived from *τρίς* and *ἅγιος*, which literally means

"thrice-holy." This term is used to describe the series of prayers that are recited collectively at the very onset of most services, although it makes reference only to the first prayer. In its entirety the Trisagion reads: Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us (three times). Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and

to the Holy Spirit; both now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen. All-Holy Trinity, have mercy on us. Lord, be gracious unto our sins. Master, pardon our iniquities. Holy One, visit and heal our infirmities, for Thy Name's sake. Lord have mercy (three times). Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; both

now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen. Our Father Who art in the Heavens, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but

deliver us from the evil one. Amen.

[81] 2nd tone hymn from the Funeral Service.

[82] The daily prayer rule for monks is to make the sign of the cross 1,200 times while simultaneously saying the Jesus Prayer with each cross, and to do 150 prostrations. Additionally, if any of the daily services (i.e., Midnight

Office, Orthros, Hours, Vespers, and Small Compline) are not read, they are replaced by saying a specified number of Jesus Prayers, typically using a 300-knot prayer rope.

[83] A stasidi is the traditional seat used in Orthodox churches. It is a wooden stand with armrests and a seat.

[84] A talanton is a wooden board (used predominantly in monasteries) that is struck with a wooden hammer to signal that a service will begin shortly in the church. The sounds produced when it is struck at the characteristic Athonite rhythm resemble the utterance, “To talanton, to talanton, to ta–to ta–to talanton,” remind the monks

of Christ's injunction to cultivate the talents (vid. Mt. 25:14-29) that the Lord has given to each Christian (Constantine Cavarnos, *Anchored in God,* Belmont: IBMGS, p. 157).

[85] A kopano (*κόπανο*) is a piece of wood, similar to a bat used to play cricket, that was used to hit clothing washed by hand when it was

rinsed in water. It is an oral tradition that Noah hit a piece of wood in order to call the animals into the ark (*ibid.*, p. 156).